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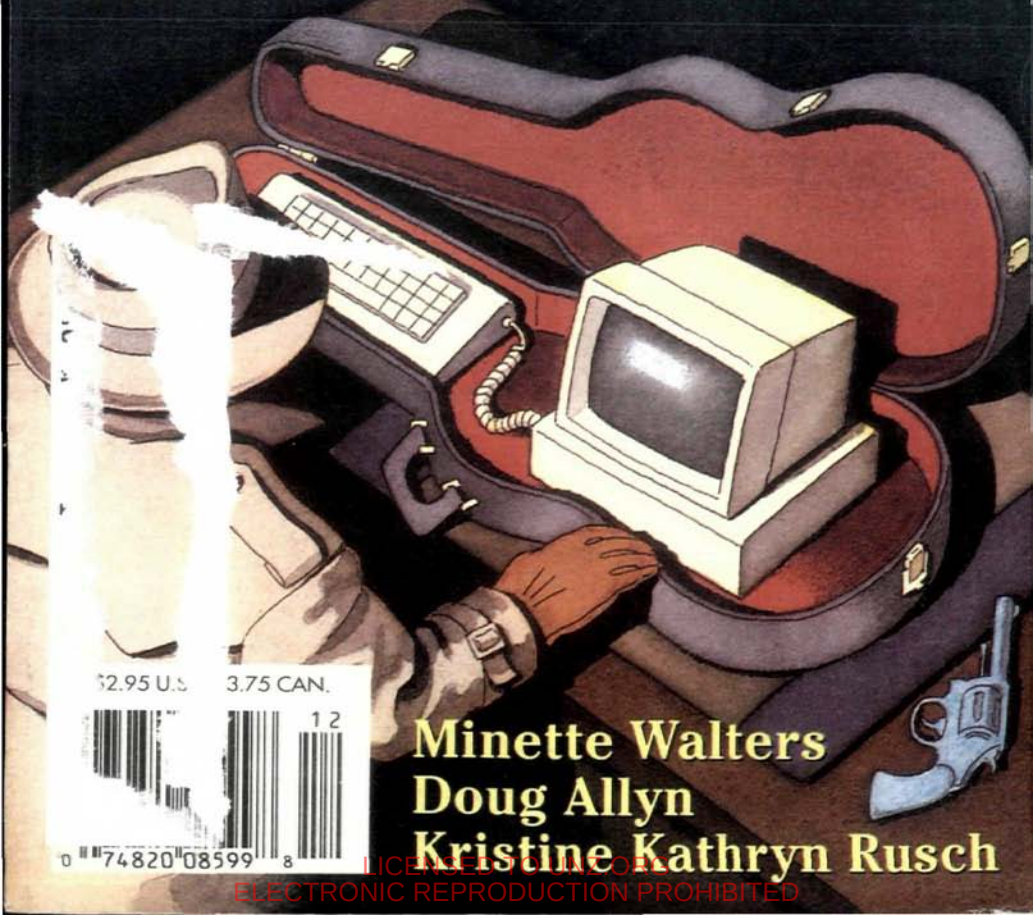

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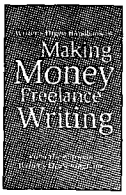

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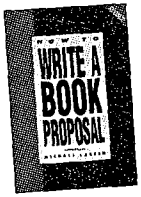

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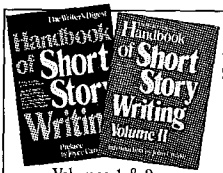

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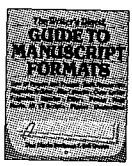

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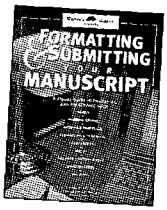

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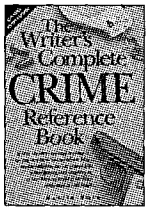

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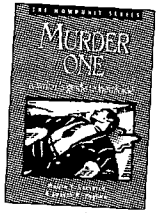

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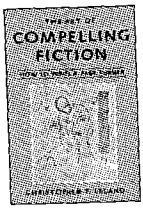

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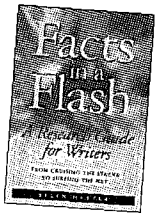

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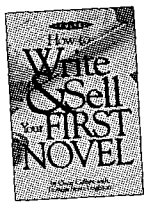

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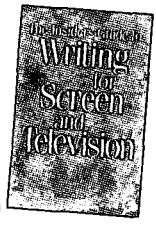

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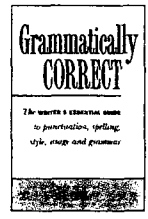

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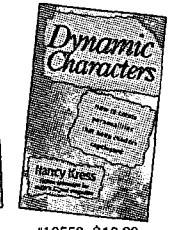

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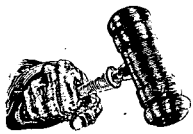

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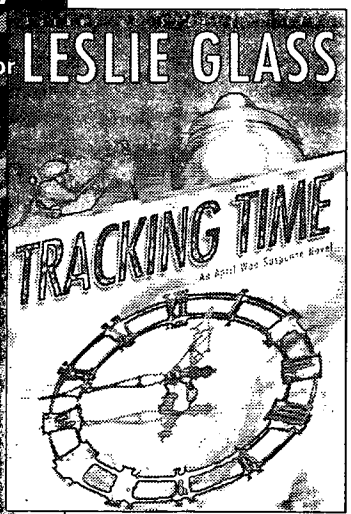

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Art by June Levine

THE CHRISTMAS MITZVAH

by Doug Allyn

The train grumbled as Ari shifted in his seat, trying to relax. Beyond the windows, the upstate New York countryside was Christmas-card perfect, snow crystals glistening on the passing pines and power lines, swirling in the icy air like glitter in a water-globe.

He gazed into the fading afternoon, exhausted, nerves raw, an emotional shambles. Desperately needed to sleep. But he was afraid to close his eyes. "For in that sleep . . ."

"I beg your pardon?"

The woman in the seat facing him was eyeing him curiously.

"Were you speaking to me?"

"I didn't know I was speaking at all," Ari said. "Sorry."

"No problem, my book crashed and burned forty miles ago," she said, closing a current paperback bestseller with a slap. "Heading

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home for the holidays?"

"No," he said reluctantly. "I have . . . personal business upstate." She was attractive, he supposed, thirtyish with tousled chestnut hair, olive complexion, teal and ebony Versace running suit. Her carry-on bag held a laptop, two paperbacks, tissues, a notebook. It didn't have a nametag that said New York City Commuter but it might as well have.

Bored, she obviously wanted to talk. He didn't. But he didn't want to sleep either. "How about you? Heading home?"

"Christmas in the boondocks. Mom, Dad, grandparents, cousins, cranberries, the works. A Hallmark moment." She gave him a rueful smile. A good smile. "I keep waiting to outgrow the excitement of it someday. Haven't yet, though. What business are you in?"

"I teach English lit at CUNY, the John Jay campus."

"Really? I was an undergrad there. Pre-law. I don't recall seeing you." Would have remembered, she thought.

Compactly built, with a narrow jaw, dark hair, and intense eyes, Ari wasn't a conventionally handsome man. The face was interesting, though. Definitely memorable.

"I've only been on the faculty three years," Ari said. "When were you there?"

"Longer ago than that." She grinned. "I'm with a midtown law firm now, contracts and estate planning. Boring, boilerplate stuff. Do you enjoy teaching?"

"It has its moments," Ari said, glancing away. "You said you were heading home?"

"Bavaria, a little village just north of Rhinebeck. Is something wrong?" He was staring at her.

"No, I—that's where I'm going. Bavaria. Did you grow up there?"

"Born and raised. I work in the city, go home most weekends. Why?"

"Did you know a girl named Claudine? Claudine Levelle?"

"Sure, she and my younger sister were best friends in high school—why? What's wrong?"

"She was killed yesterday. Auto accident." Ari slumped in his seat.

"My God, how awful. What happened?"

Congratulations to the ever-popular Doug Allyn, who adds another award this year to those already adorning the walls of his study in Montrose, Michigan. *EQMM* recently learned that the Short Mystery Fiction Society's 1999 Derringer for Best Novella goes to Mr. Allyn's "Saint Bobby," *(EQMM* 4/99). More good news arrived just a few days later: he is also nominated for the 1999 Shamus for Best Short Story, for "Unchained Melody" *(EQMM* 1/99).

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"I don't really know. There was a message on my machine this morning. Police chief named . . . Patton? He didn't say much, only that . . . she was gone."

"You're a relative?"

"Her husband. Ari Isackson."

"I'm so sorry. I'm Norma Deutch. Look, if there's anything I can do . . ."

But there never is. Death has no remedy. No extensions, no money back. And no returns.

Still, Norma asked again if she could help. Ari was so lost in reverie that he didn't hear. Accepting his silence, she went back to reading her book.

But she couldn't get into it. Couldn't help wondering.

Claudine Levelle? With this . . . quiet, conventional guy? No way. Claudine with Brad Pitt, maybe, or some stud-muffin pro ballplayer. Granted, Isackson wasn't bad-looking for a professor. Older though, mid thirties at least. Married to a golden girl like Claudine? Norma just couldn't picture it.

She lost him in the crush of detraining. Grabbing her duffel bag from the pile at the front of the coach, she was halfway across the elevated platform when she spotted Isackson, alone, looking around in confusion. And something about him . . .

Norma hesitated, then turned and walked back to him.

"Professor? Is someone meeting you?"

"No, I thought I'd get a cab, but . . ."

"Not tonight, it's Christmas Eve. There are only two cabs in Bavaria and they'll both be at the airport. C'mon, my car's in the lot."

"Really, I couldn't—"

"No trouble, I'm glad to do it. Right this way."

He followed her down the concrete steps to the narrow parking lot that stretched along the tracks. No gates, no guards. No need for them.

Beeping open the trunk of a red Toyota Camry, Norma tossed in her bag, shifting it to one side to make room for his single leather carry-on.

"Where to?" she said, firing up the Toyota as he eased in beside her.

"I'm . . . not sure. The police department, I suppose. Or maybe . . . the morgue?"

"There's no morgue here. Why don't I take you to Claudine's folks? They'll know what to do. What's the address?"

"I don't know. I've never met them."

She frowned. "You don't know her parents?"

"No. We've been married a year but . . . I never met her parents. I've never been here before."

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"I . . . see," Norma said, though she definitely didn't. "Um, okay. Then where would you like to go?"

"I don't know, I—" His voice trailed off. Norma glanced at him. He was crying. Jaw clenched, eyes closed, tears were streaming silently as he struggled for control.

Easing the car to the side of the road, she parked, switching off the wipers, waiting.

"I'm sorry," he said hoarsely, after a time.

"Don't be. Here." She offered him a tissue. "Look, I'm in no hurry and I really want to help, okay? Give yourself a break here, then we'll figure out what to do."

"Thank you. I . . . anyway, thanks." Dabbing at his eyes, he took a ragged breath. "Okay. I'm okay now. I suppose . . . I should contact the authorities. Can you take me to the police station?"

"Sure, but they may not be open. Bavaria only has five cops, Professor, and they're usually on patrol." Sliding a cell phone out of its dashboard sleeve, she tapped nine-one-one with her thumb. He heard the click of an answer, couldn't make out the voice.

"Emergency, my foot, Sherry," Norma said, giving Isackson an apologetic grin. "You guys wouldn't know an emergency from . . . It's Norma Deutch, who do you think? Yeah, yeah, I know. Look, I'm with Professor Isackson, Claudine Levelle's husband? And . . . No, I'm just giving him a lift from the station. He wants to know . . . Okay. Thanks. We're on our way. See ya. Oh, Merry Christmas, Sherry. Best to Carl. Yeah, I will."

Isackson was eyeing her oddly. "That was nine-one-one?"

"The Bavaria version. Chief Patton will meet us at the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"Right. Claudine is . . . there."

"I see. Thank you." Neither of them spoke for a while.

She thought Ari had retreated inward again, but he was staring out the window, checking over the town. The glow of the streetlights on the mantle of new-fallen snow gave Bavaria a fairy-tale air. Snug, clean, pristine.

"An unusual place," he said. "Were all the houses built by the same contractor?"

"No, but all buildings within the city limits have to be designed Bavarian-style, which mostly means gingerbread on the eaves and decorative shutters. It can be a bit overwhelming, but tourists like it, and to tell the truth, most of the residents do too. You'll never mistake it for Levittown. Do you live in Manhattan?"

He nodded. "An apartment in the West Seventies within walking distance of the campus. You?"

"Soho. And if you're wondering, the answer is, no, I'm straight. But I love the area and the people. When I come home the culture shock jolts me every time."

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"Yes," Ari said, eyeing the ornate filigree and massively carved clock on the First National Bank. "I guess it could."

Bavaria County General Hospital wasn't nearly as grand as its name. The gray brick two-story building occupied half a city block just off the shopping district. Norma wheeled into the lot, parked, and climbed out.

"Thank you again," Ari said. "You can drop me here. I'm sure—"

"Professor, you won't be able to rent a car until tomorrow, I don't have to be anywhere, and I'm not about to abandon you in a strange town on Christmas Eve, okay? Not in your . . . situation. Come on."

Norma made a quick inquiry at the front desk while Ari waited. The building was abustle with visitors, many carrying flowers or gifts. Christmas Muzak murmured from the PA system as Norma led Ari down a brightly lit stairway to the basement.

The lower level was deserted, obviously used mostly for storage—metal doors, closed and padlocked. Their footsteps echoed off the tiled walls as they followed the yellow marker on the hallway wall.

Norma pushed through the pneumatic doors at the end, then hesitated. Ari moved past her. A stainless-steel gurney was in the center of the barren green room. Draped with a sheet, it obviously held a body. Two cops were waiting beside it, blue winter-uniform jackets open, Smokey hats in their hands. One was younger, tall, blond, the other a burly block of a man with a gunmetal-gray brush cut, bulbous red nose. The younger cop stepped forward.

"Professor Isackson? I'm Chief Patton, this is Sergeant Brewer. We're sorry for your loss, sir. Thanks for coming down."

"You said I'd . . . need to identify the body?"

"Right. Could you step over here, please?" The burly cop nudged Patton, glancing pointedly at Norma.

"Miss, you might want to wait outside," Patton suggested.

"I'm all right."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. Professor?" Patton raised the corner of the sheet, revealing the face of a dark-haired woman, battered almost beyond recognition.

Ari gazed down at her, swallowing, then nodded. "It's Claudine." He swayed and Patton seized his arm.

"Are you okay? Brewer, get him a chair." The burly cop grabbed a plastic chair from against the wall and Patton eased Ari down on it. "Put your head down, Professor."

"No," Ari said, taking a deep breath. "I'm okay."

"Are you sure? I have a few questions, some details we need to clear up. If you think you're up to it?"

"Really, I'm all right. How can I help?"

"Professor, do you know why your wife was in Bavaria?"

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"Why?" Ari echoed, puzzled. "Claudine grew up here. Her family's here."

"But she'd been staying at the Bavarian Inn. She hadn't contacted her family. In fact, they say they haven't heard from her in some time."

"I—knew there were some problems between them but . . . I don't understand."

"So you're saying you don't actually know why she came here? What did she tell you?"

"Only that she was going home for a few days. I assumed it was to see her family."

"So she didn't mention she'd be with her old boyfriend?" Brewer interjected.

"What are you talking about?" Ari straightened in the chair.

"Bobby Follett, the guy in the car with her? He and your wife were a hot number back in high school. Cheerleader and the football star. Lotta heavy breathin' and backseat boogie, I expect. Or didn't she mention that either?"

Isackson eyed Brewer intently a moment, then turned back to Patton. "I must be missing something. You're obviously trying to make me angry, but I don't understand why. On the phone you said my wife was killed in an auto accident—"

"Actually, the term I used was wreck," Patton said. "We doubt very much it was an accident. Bobby Follett and your wife were driving west on Forty-three when another vehicle rammed them and forced them off the road. The car rolled down an embankment. Your wife was killed instantly, Bobby's in critical condition up in the intensive-care unit. It was a hit-and-run, almost certainly deliberate."

"My God . . . and you think I had something to do with it?"

"A young wife playing around with her old boyfriend, somebody runs them off the road? Professors are supposed to be bright. Who would you elect as a likely suspect?"

"I don't know, but surely this . . . Bobby person could tell you what happened."

"Follett's in a coma, not expected to live. Maybe he'll surface long enough to make a statement, maybe not. So while we're waiting, would you mind accounting for your time yesterday, Professor Isackson? Say from four until eight?"

"Four until—I was at home."

"The whole time?"

"We've had exams the past week. I was correcting papers."

"Alone?"

"Of course."

"Did you go out at all? For dinner, say?"

"No."

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"Really? I called you twice during that period. No one answered."

"I had the machine on. That's how I got your message."

"But you didn't return my call until this morning at nine. Why so long?"

"I was working, waiting for Claudine to call, and apparently fell asleep at my desk. I woke in the middle of the night and stumbled off to bed. Didn't check my messages until this morning."

"Or maybe you left the city about three," Brewer interjected. "Drove up here, spotted your wife and Bobby, smashed 'em up, then drove back."

"Not possible. I'm a New Yorker, Sergeant, born and raised. I don't own a car, don't even have a current driver's license."

"You wouldn't be the first guy to drive without a license," Brewer pressed. "Drunks do it all the time. You could have used a phony ID to rent a car."

"But I didn't."

"No?" Brewer said, leaning in, looming over him. "How did you meet your wife, Isackson? You're a lot older than her, right? Was she one of your students? Maybe swapped you a little tail for some grades?"

"You incredible piece of crap," Ari said, rising slowly. "Why are you—"

"Sit down, Professor," Brewer said, thrusting him back in the chair, "and watch your mouth. You ain't in Jew Yawk now—"

Ari lunged upward, head-butting Brewer full in the face, knocking the larger man backward, blood streaming, clawing for his weapon.

"Stop it!" Norma screamed. And it worked. For a moment, everyone froze. Blinking, Ari raised his hands and sank slowly back onto the chair.

"Jesus," Brewer groaned, covering his face, "my nose."

"Professor Isackson, you're under arrest for assault on a police officer," Patton said, pulling handcuffs from a clip on his belt.

"Bad idea," Norma said.

"What? Look, miss—"

"It's Deutch, Chief Patton, Norma Deutch, attorney-at-law, actually. I'd give you my card but I left my purse in the car."

"An attorney? You didn't say—"

"No one asked me. But as a member of the bar I'd advise you to think a minute. Because I didn't see any assault on a police officer."

"Are you nuts?" Brewer snapped, outraged. "He butted me in the face!"

"*After* you laid hands on him and *after* you all but called his wife a prostitute. *Maybe* the man was just trying to stand up and your

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face got in the way, sport. Do you really want to run this past a judge, Chief? I guarantee it won't fly. You didn't even read him his rights, forgodsake."

Patton hesitated, anger and caution battling in his eyes.

Caution won. "Okay," he conceded. "Maybe we could have handled this better. But that doesn't put your client in the clear. I can still hold him for twenty-four hours."

"Or, as an officer of the court I can guarantee his appearance," Norma offered. "That way none of us will have to fill out any paperwork *or* make any statements for the record about what happened here."

"Point taken." Patton nodded. "But he stays in our jurisdiction, understand? Now get him out of here."

"No," Ari said softly. "I want my wife's body released."

"What's the rush, Professor? In a hurry to bury the evidence?"

"By Jewish religious law she should be buried within twenty-four hours."

"Claudine wasn't Jewish."

"You don't know a thing about her, or me," Ari said coldly. "I want her out of this place."

"That's tough, Isackson. The body's being held for autopsy and her parents have already claimed it in any case. You'll have to work out the funeral arrangements with them. C'mon, Sarge, we'd better get upstairs and get your face looked at."

Brewer stopped in front of Ari, glowering. "This isn't over."

"It is for me." Ari shrugged. "But if not, I'll be around a day or so."

"You may be around a lot longer than that," Patton said grimly. "C'mon, Don."

"Chief?" Norma said. "If the Levelles have already claimed the body they must have identified it, right? So none of this was really necessary. Was it?"

"Just keep your client available, Counselor," Patton said, leading Brewer out. "If Follett regains consciousness we may want to talk to the professor again. In a hurry."

The pneumatic door whooshed softly closed behind them. Ari and Norma eyed each other in silence.

"Thank you for . . . what you did," he said.

"No charge. They were out of line. So were you."

"Yes, I guess I was. Which makes what you did all the more remarkable."

"Forget it. It's Christmas Eve. It was a—what's the Jewish word for a good deed?"

"A *mitzvah.*"

"Right. Consider it a Christmas *mitzvah.* Are you . . . pretty much finished here?"

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"I'd like a minute if you wouldn't mind."

"Of course. I'll be outside."

But in the hall, Norma couldn't resist glancing back through the door. Ari was standing beside Claudine's covered body on the gurney, his hand resting on hers. No prayers, no tears, he just stood there in silence. But something in the set of his shoulders, the narrow line of his mouth, betrayed an anguish beyond words that was painful to watch.

When he joined her, his face was different, grim now, gray as sculpted stone.

"Where to?"

"For you? Home, to be with your family. I can't impose—"

"It's not that simple anymore, Professor. Like it or not, Patton just made me legally responsible for you."

"But I'm not actually your client."

"No one said you were. Patton assumed it, and since I didn't contradict him I guess I volunteered. No complaints. So where do we go next?"

"To see Claudine's parents, I suppose. Arrangements have to be made. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Absolutely," Norma said firmly, starting up the stairs.

She found the Levelles' address in the lobby phone book. Ari made a brief call to say he was coming, and they walked together to her car as lonely flakes drifted down through the halogen glare of the parking lot.

In the car, Ari waited until they were under way, then swiveled to face her. "A moment ago I said I wasn't your client. Should I be?"

"Do you need an attorney, you mean? It's too soon to say. With luck, Bobby will recover and clear you. I'm not a criminal attorney anyway. If you want to buy a business or draw up a will, I can help. But if your situation gets much worse, you may really need a criminal attorney."

"But I haven't done anything."

"Offhand, I'd consider head-butting a cop something. You didn't learn that in English 101."

"More like Crooklyn 101. My father taught school in Prospect Park. I grew up there. Learned a lot in a hurry. And rule number one is, don't cross the Crips or the cops. Tangling with Brewer was a mistake. I lost it for a moment. But he'll be waiting a very long time for an apology."

"Apologies are the least of your problems, Profess—"

"Please, my name is Ari."

"Ari." She nodded, savoring the sound. "Okay, Ari, there's no delicate way to put this. The police obviously suspect you of killing your wife."

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"That's crazy. I didn't even know there'd been a crime until they told me."

"Still, considering the circumstances, you're a logical suspect."

"Yeah," he conceded. "I suppose things do look . . . a bit suspicious."

"A bit? As your non-attorney, let me offer you some legal advice. The governor of Illinois suspended executions after thirteen death-row inmates were found innocent. They didn't cut deals or get off on technicalities; they were innocent, period. With the best of intentions, cops sometimes make mistakes and so do juries. And it wouldn't take much of a mistake to put you in a lot of trouble."

"How do you mean?"

Norma took her eyes off the road to glance at him. "Look, we just met. I don't know how frank you want me to be."

"If you hadn't been with me I'd be in jail already, Miss Deutch. Be as frank as you like."

"Okay," Norma said, taking a deep breath. "What Brewer said about your wife and Bobby Follett in high school? It was true. Claudine and my sister were good friends so I knew her casually. Cheerleader, homecoming queen. Bobby was a star halfback and they were definitely involved."

"I dated in high school, too."

"So did I. But I didn't go with the same guy for four years. Claudine did. With Bobby."

"That was quite some time ago."

"Longer for you than for Claudine."

"My, you are very . . . direct, Miss Deutch."

"Sorry. And it's Norma. Two-fifteen Maple? This is it, I think." She pulled up in front of a comfortable two-story home, white with dark green shutters that matched the ornate Bavarian gingerbread decorating the eaves. Ari frowned, puzzled.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just that Claudine never said much about her family. I assumed it was because they were poor or something."

"Hardly. Her dad owns an appliance store and a real-estate agency. Definitely UMC. Would you prefer to see them alone?"

"I'd rather not see them at all," Ari admitted, climbing out. "Not like this."

"Well, the least I can do is make the introductions," she said, joining Ari as he trudged up to the front door. It opened before he could knock. A priest filled the doorway. Wearing a brown tweed jacket over his vest and clerical collar, he was as tall as the door and nearly as wide, with an affable, Pillsbury doughboy face, balding, with a fringe of gray hair. He was leaning on a crutch, his left foot in a cast.

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"Mr. Isackson? I'm Father Paul Michaud," he said, offering a hand the size of a shovel for a perfunctory shake.

"Hello, Father," Norma said. "Norma Deutch. Remember me?"

"Of course," he said, shaking hands. "We don't see you as often as we used to."

"I live in the city now, Father. I'll be at mass Sunday."

"Good, I'll be speaking on Christmas Catholics," he said drily. "And you know Professor Isackson from . . . ?"

"The train station," she said simply. "He needed help."

"I see. Well, please come in, both of you."

Limping painfully, he ushered them into the living room.

Loden-green carpeting as thick as a lawn, overstuffed furniture. A cozy fire flickered in the grate of a fieldstone fireplace at the far end of the room. A gaily decorated Christmas tree stood near it, filling the air with a clean pine scent.

Though well dressed, the couple seated on the sofa seemed utterly defeated. Herb Levelle had a thick mane of silver hair, light blue cardigan, gray slacks, gray pallor. His eyes were red and swollen. Unshed tears, Ari wondered, or the double scotch clenched in his fist, which clearly wasn't his first.

His wife, Irene, looked younger. Tall, her upswept blond hair was perfectly coifed, but even her impeccable makeup couldn't mask her pain. Or the anger in her ice-blue eyes. She rose gracefully and nodded curtly to Ari as Father Paul made the introductions. Herb didn't bother to get up. He seemed scarcely aware anyone had come.

"I'm terribly sorry that we meet at such a time," Ari said.

"Yes, it's a bit odd, isn't it?" Irene said, coolly looking him over, unimpressed. "Have you known my daughter long?"

"We've . . . been married for over a year," Ari said.

Irene winced as though she'd been slapped. "Our invitation must have gotten lost in the mail."

"It was a civil ceremony," Ari said. "Just us and a judge."

"You didn't invite your parents either? Why not? Ashamed of marrying outside your faith?"

"My parents are deceased," Ari said evenly. "But Claudine and I were considering a second ceremony, a religious one, sometime in the new year."

"Ah, so you've been taking catechism then," Father Michaud said, brightening.

"No, Claudine took several months of instruction from a rabbi," Ari said. "She met with the Beit Din and formally converted last July. I'm sorry, I assumed you knew."

"Good God," Herb said, looking away.

"How would we know?" Irene said bitterly. "Since neither of you had the courtesy to tell anyone anything."

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"Mrs. Levelle, I don't know what problems there were between you," Ari said helplessly. "Claudine never talked about it—"

"Problems?" Herb demanded, staggering to his feet. "Who said we had any problems?"

"No one," Ari said. "In fact, until tonight I assumed—"

"Assumed what?"

"I thought you might be dirt poor, that Claudine was . . . ashamed of you or something. I just didn't know."

"And how did you know our daughter?" Irene asked. "You're clearly much older than Claudine."

"I teach at CUNY. Claudine is—was—a student there."

"Student of what?" Herb asked.

"Her major was economics but—"

"Economics," Herb snorted.

Ari eyed him a moment before continuing. "Mr. Levelle, your daughter could have majored in anything. She was a brilliant student."

"I don't doubt she did well in your class."

"She was never one of my students. We met at a faculty mixer, we clicked, and—"

"Clicked?" Irene echoed bitterly. "Is that what they call it now?"

"Ma'am," Ari said, darkening, "I know you're upset—"

"So upset we're forgetting our manners," Father Michaud said hastily. "You haven't offered our guests a drink, Irene. I know I can certainly use one."

"I—of course, Father, you're quite right," Irene said. "Would you like coffee? A glass of wine?"

"Whatever Herb's having will be fine," Michaud said. "Maybe it'll numb my ankle a bit. Join us, Professor?"

"Nothing for me, thanks."

"Coffee sounds good," Norma said. "Can I help?"

As the two women disappeared into the kitchen, Herb pointedly turned his back on Ari, sipping his drink.

Ari shrugged and sauntered over to examine a collection of family photos beside the fireplace. Father Michaud limped over to join him. "She was a lovely child, wasn't she?"

Ari nodded, swallowing.

"Her whole life is here," Father Paul pointed out. "Middle-school cheerleader, high-school homecoming queen, prom queen. She was a very popular girl."

"And this would be Bobby . . . ?"

"Follett, yes. My nephew. He and Claudine dated in high school."

"Your nephew?"

"My sister's only son. He had such promise then, so many hopes . . ." He shook his head. "Such a terrible, terrible waste."

"I'm sorry," Ari said. "I didn't know."

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"No reason you should. Graduation was a long time ago."

"Was it? I don't suppose you'd know why Claudine and Bobby were . . . together the night of the accident?"

"Certainly not," Michaud said sharply. "Don't you?"

The two men eyed each other. Michaud looked away first.

"I apologize for my tone, Professor. This damned ankle's making me surly. Touch-football game in October. Don't heal as quickly as I used to. I meant no offense. I take it Claudine didn't tell you much about Bobby."

"Nothing at all."

"Well, doubtless you were both more concerned with the future than the past."

"Did you know my wife well?"

"I've known the family for years, as parishioners and friends. Why?"

"In these pictures, Claudine's hair is blond."

"Of course. She was always blond," Father Michaud said, relieved at the change of subject. "Why do you ask?"

"Her hair's been dark since I've known her. I always assumed it was her natural color."

"I'm no expert on hair," the priest said wryly, massaging his bald spot. "Perhaps her mother will know."

"Will know what?" Irene said, handing the priest a tall drink, keeping an equally tall tumbler for herself.

"The professor tells me Claudine changed her hair color."

"I noticed that at the hospital," Herb put in. "Looked like crap. Don't know why she'd change it. Unless it's part of this conversion nonsense."

"It wasn't nonsense," Ari said evenly.

"I'm sure Herb didn't mean—" Father Michaud began.

"The hell I didn't!" Herb snapped, cutting him off. "My girl's dead and some guy I've never even met says she converted? Turned Jew without even telling us? I don't believe it."

"Nevertheless, it's true," Ari said.

"No way. She would have discussed it with us."

"I'm sure she intended to—"

"Or maybe the whole damned thing was your idea. Change her faith, keep her from her parents—"

"I assure you it wasn't," Ari said sharply. "I'm not a religious man, Mr. Levelle. I never asked Claudine to convert. It was her choice to do so."

"What difference does it make now?" Irene said, numbly. "I expected to help with her wedding someday. Now there's only her funeral."

"True enough," Ari said. "That's why I came."

"Don't worry, Professor," Irene said, "we don't hold grudges. The

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funeral will be Saturday at St. Vincent's. You're welcome to attend."

"Mrs. Levelle, we need to talk about this."

"About what?"

"I don't mean to be difficult, but I would like Claudine buried according to Jewish ritual. I believe it's what she would have wanted."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Herb sputtered. "Claudine was Catholic, born and raised!"

"I'm aware of that. But as an adult, after a good deal of study and thought, she chose a new faith. Shouldn't we honor her decision?"

"We have only your word it ever happened! And anyway, she was just a kid, she didn't know what the hell she was doing!"

"She was twenty-two, sir, a grown woman, and my wife. And one of the brightest, wisest women I've ever known. She hadn't been the girl in those photographs for a long time."

"Damn it, she would never have done a thing like that behind our backs!"

"Sir, when was the last time you actually spoke to Claudine? How long has it been?"

"Get out of my house, you sonofabitch!" Herb roared. "Out!"

"As you wish," Ari said, taking his coat from the hook in the hall. "Father Michaud, you can confirm Claudine's conversion with Rabbi Benjamin Goldfarb at Temple Beth El on Eighty-first."

"There's no need for that," the priest said mildly. "I'm sure—"

"Please do so. To clarify things for her parents if nothing else. We'll talk again later."

"I'll take care of it if you like, but frankly, this conversion business is difficult for me to accept, too. I've known Claudine all her life. As a parishioner," he added pointedly. "Where can we reach you?"

"At the Bavarian Inn. I have a reservation there."

"Fine. I'll call you after things . . . settle down here."

"Thank you. Look, I'm terribly sorry about all this. I didn't mean to cause the Levelles any further distress but . . . Anyway, I'm sorry."

"Everyone's sorry," Father Michaud said grimly. "It's not much comfort, is it?"

"Where to now?" Norma asked, zipping her running suit against the night.

"Could we walk a bit? I need to clear my head."

"I know the feeling," Norma said, falling into step beside him. "Things got pretty intense back there."

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"It's more than that. There are too many things I don't understand. Perhaps you can help."

"How so?"

"The photographs of Claudine. I scarcely recognized her."

"Because she'd changed her hair color, you mean?"

"It was more than that. Her whole demeanor was different. She was so . . . radiant."

"She was only a kid then," Norma observed. "Girls grow up. The pictures were true, though. She was always a fireball. A golden girl. We all expected her to be a movie star or something."

"She took a run at that, studied acting in the city, got a few modeling jobs, but nothing developed and I don't think her heart was really in it. So she decided to make her life over. And went back to school."

"And met you."

He nodded. They paused at the corner, watching snowflakes tumble down through the halo of the streetlights. Most homes were decorated with wreaths or Santas, with strings of holiday lights along their eaves or window frames.

"I suppose some people considered us an odd match," he said, to himself as much as to her. "But we really did seem to mesh. Perhaps because we both wanted the same thing."

"How do you mean?"

"I was a street kid who once had a hunger to learn and loved teaching but between the daily grind and trying to fit in, I'd lost it. Claudine's passion for learning rekindled my own, reminded me how I'd once felt about it. Things happened fairly quickly with us. We were married four months after we met."

"That is quick."

"It didn't seem like it. Consider the nomenclature of love, Miss Deutch. We don't walk into love, or stroll, or even run. We fall. At inconvenient times and for no rational reason at all, we fall. Claudine and I fell."

"That's . . . very romantic."

"Perhaps. The trouble with falling is that sometimes landings can be rough."

"How do you mean?"

"We didn't know each other very well, different ages, different brands of toothpaste. The usual frictions all new couples have."

"When did she convert? If you don't mind my asking?"

"Not at all, I'm . . . trying to get some perspective on it myself. To make sense . . . In any case, she took instruction before we were married and continued afterward. It took five or six months and the formal ritual seemed important to her at first. Recently, she attended services less often."

"Why?"

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"Over the past few months she's been withdrawn. Troubled. I thought she might be having . . . second thoughts about our relationship. So I asked."

"What did she say?"

"That it was the opposite. She wanted a family, but wasn't sure I did. I have a nine-year-old daughter, Sara, from a previous marriage and I adore her. Claudine thought Sara might be all I wanted."

"And was she?"

"Not at all. I love kids. Plus, anything that would make Claudine happy was fine with me. So she took a physical, to be sure she was getting enough vitamins, whatever. Only . . . " He swallowed.

"What is it?"

"Claudine couldn't have children. I don't know why, she absolutely wouldn't talk about it. We discussed adopting and began looking into that possibility but . . . a few weeks ago something happened."

A door opened across the street, spilling relatives who were shouting seasons greetings at each other as they piled into their cars. Ari watched a moment, then continued on. They turned left again at the corner, circling the block.

"It's really lovely here," he said. "I wonder why she left?"

"For the same reason most of us did. Bavaria's almost a factory town. Career options here are working at the Genova Paper Mill or flipping burgers. Most young people move on to look for something better in the city."

"And did you find it?"

"More or less," Norma said. "Did Claudine? You said something happened. What was it?"

"I wish I knew. Two weeks ago I came home and found Claudine in a rage. She'd smashed some china, thrown a lamp. She tried to laugh it off, said it was PMS or something. But when I pressed her, she blew up. She admitted it was some problem with her parents, wouldn't talk about it, said she'd deal with it. And I let it pass. God help me, I was afraid to push, afraid I might . . . lose her. So I let it pass. And here I am."

"This must be awful for you."

"And for her parents and everyone else. But most of all it must have been awful for Claudine. She was so angry. And so alone."

"But . . . not at the end," Norma said carefully. Ari glanced at her, then looked away.

"No. Apparently she was with an old boyfriend. Do you know Bobby Follett?"

"Bobby? Sure."

"What is he like?"

"A nice enough guy. Local football hero who found out the

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world's bigger than Bavaria when he went on to college. Flunked out, came home to work at his dad's car dealership awhile. Drifted on to Buffalo a few years ago. Still selling cars."

"Is he married?"

"I don't believe so, no. I would have heard. In fact . . ." She shook her head.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." They turned again. Norma's car was just ahead.

"It was clearly something, Miss Deutch. Don't worry about my feelings, I doubt I can hurt worse than I do already. What was it?"

"It's just that Bavaria's a small town, Ari. Everybody knows everybody's business. And I once heard that Bobby was, well, still carrying a torch for Claudine. That he'd never gotten over her. Sorry."

"Don't be. I don't blame him a bit. But I don't believe it was reciprocal. Claudine and I talked of a great many things, life, love, the works. But she never mentioned him to me."

"Would she have?"

"I'd like to think so."

"But you don't know why she came home, or why they were together?"

"The together seems simple enough. They were once very close. Why shouldn't she see him?"

"That's very open-minded. But it wasn't a visit, exactly. Bobby's parents moved to Florida a few years ago. He has no family here anymore."

"And you're implying that if Bobby and Claudine met here, it was arranged beforehand? A tryst?"

"I didn't say that."

"Don't apologize, it's an obvious conclusion. Except for one thing. An affair doesn't explain what happened to them. Two people who haven't lived in Bavaria for years meet here and promptly get smashed to hell. It makes no sense. Assuming their attacker wasn't me."

"Right," she agreed, "assuming that."

A police car was parked in the driveway of the Bavarian Inn when they pulled in. Chief Patton climbed out, intercepting them at the door. "Professor? Miss Deutch? We need to talk."

He led them to a deserted coffee room just off the main entrance. Johnny Mathis was murmuring a carol over the house PA system. "O Holy night . . ."

"Bobby Follett came around twenty minutes ago," Patton said, facing them. "He identified you as the driver of the car that forced them off the road, Professor Isackson."

"That's not possible."

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"What else?" Norma said.

"Else?" Patton echoed.

"Obviously there's more to it or you'd already have Ari in cuffs."

"There is," Patton admitted, taking off his hat, tossing it on the Formica table near the Starbuck's coffee maker. "Anybody want coffee?" He poured himself a cup of mocha caramel, added two sugar packets, then stirred it slowly, staring into the ooze as though he was reading an omen.

"Have you ever met Bobby Follett, Professor Isackson?" he asked abruptly.

"Until today I'd never even heard of him."

"So the only things he'd know about you would be what Claudine chose to tell him?"

"I suppose so. What are you getting at?"

"I ran you through the Law Enforcement Information Net. Your story checks out—no driver's license, no auto titles. Zip. What's more, no car-rental companies have reported any white units returned with anything more than parking-lot dings. NYPD is canvassing your friends and acquaintances, asking if anyone lent you a car. So far, *nada*. Four white cars were stolen in the city yesterday. Two were recovered, stripped but not wrecked. The other two are still missing."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to understand that we may be small-town cops but we're honest, we have computers, and we operate on the presumption of innocence, even when somebody roughs up one of my people."

"Brewer was way out of line and you know it," Norma said.

"May have seemed like it," Patton admitted. "I don't approve of rough stuff but I don't apologize for it either. It has its uses. Sometimes car thieves or con men show up, try to work the area. Brewer roughs 'em up, they don't come back. More importantly, their friends don't either. It saves wear and tear on the court system and you can walk any street in Bavaria safely, twenty-four/seven. You can't do that in New York."

"But Claudine wasn't killed in New York," Ari said quietly. "She came home to your safe little picture-postcard of a town. And somebody killed her."

"Maybe someone followed her here. Had anyone threatened her? Ex-husband, boyfriend, wacko coworker, anyone at all?"

"A stalker? No. She was careful in the city, but she wasn't afraid of anyone in particular."

"You obviously have doubts about Bobby's ID or you wouldn't be asking all this," Norma said. "Why?"

"Bobby definitely identified Professor Isackson," Patton said, sipping his coffee, "but when I pushed him for a description, he got

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pretty vague. Granted, he's in bad shape. Maybe he didn't understand my question or simply didn't care. But he also said you were driving a black sedan and wasn't sure of the make."

"Didn't you say you were looking for a white car?"

"Yeah. We know from the paint scrapes that the car that struck them was white. Again, Bobby could have pegged you right and got the car wrong. It happens."

"But you don't think so, do you?" Norma said.

"He seemed pretty lucid," Patton admitted. "But his description of the professor could have been anyone, and he got the color of the car wrong. Odd mistake for someone who sells cars for a living. Since he's at least half wrong, I'm not going to arrest your client just yet, Counselor. But I want him to remain in my jurisdiction. Any problem with that?"

"I have a reservation here," Ari said. "I have no plans to leave."

"I'll hold you to that." Patton nodded, crumpling his cup and tossing it in the wastebasket. "And you too, Miss Deutch. By the way, Professor, Sergeant Brewer's got a broken nose."

"Good," Ari said.

"Yeah," Patton said, flashing an unexpected grin. "I thought you'd like that." Picking up his hat, he strode out.

Norma took a sugar doughnut from the humidor, eyed it critically, then took a wary bite. "Edible," she mumbled, brushing a crumb off her chin. Popping two plastic cups from the dispenser, she filled them to the brim with black coffee.

"My God, you haven't eaten," Ari said. "Shouldn't you be with your family?"

"My folks don't expect me until tomorrow, and I'll be stuffing myself for the next three days anyway. How about you? You look exhausted."

"I slept poorly last night," he admitted, slumping into a captain's chair beside the table. "I doubt I'll be sleeping much for a while."

"Care package." She parked a doughnut and coffee in front of him, then eased into a chair.

Ari sipped his coffee, wincing at the bitterness. "You're very kind."

"Not really. To be honest, this is the most interesting Christmas Eve I've ever had. I'm just sorry for your troubles. Which seem to be getting worse."

"Because Follett identified me?"

"Shaky or not, it's still an ID. Maybe even a deathbed statement."

"Damn it, I was in New York!"

"Then he must be mistaken. The problem is proving it."

Ari nibbled a bit of doughnut, musing. "Suppose he wasn't? Mistaken, I mean."

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"I don't follow you."

"He said I tried to kill them. Let's assume it wasn't a mistake. If he knew I didn't do it, why would he say I did?"

"Jealousy, maybe? Because you married someone he cared about? Or, considering the situation, perhaps he just guessed it was probably you."

"But he got the car wrong too. Black instead of white? That's not a likely mistake. Unless he was deliberately trying to mislead the police about what happened."

"But he'd be protecting the person who killed Claudine and injured him so badly. Why on earth would he want to?"

"Granted, it doesn't make sense."

"No, wait. Maybe it does," Norma said, tossing the remains of her doughnut in the wastebasket. "Maybe we're reading this wrong. You thought Claudine came home to visit her family but she hadn't seen them. Patton assumed she came back to—excuse my directness—light up her old flame, Bobby Follett. But if that's what it was about, why meet here where they're both known? Neither of them lives here anymore. Anywhere else would have been better."

"Maybe they had . . . memories here," Ari offered.

"Or maybe it's something else entirely. A woman who's recently married and trying to have a baby doesn't just bag it all and run off to visit an old boyfriend. You said she threw a temper tantrum not long before she came back here. What could have set her off?"

"I don't know. You've got to understand, she seldom talked about this place or her parents or the past. If she still had friends here she never mentioned them. Her only connection . . ."

He hesitated.

"What connection?"

"She subscribed to the local newspaper, the *Bavaria Weekly*. I guess it's published on weekends but we received it later in the week, Tuesday usually."

"And was the day Claudine was so upset—?"

"Last Tuesday." He nodded. "Probably just a coincidence."

"It'll be easy enough to check," she said, rising. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"To my house. It's time you met my folks."

"I don't understand."

"In addition to being nice people, they recycle. With luck, they'll have every newspaper for the past month."

The streets in front of the Deutch home hadn't been plowed yet, giving the neighborhood a delicious confectioner's air, as though a master baker had dusted it with powdered sugar. Norma tried the front door. It wasn't locked.

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"Small towns," she said, ushering Ari into a hallway that led to the living room. A warm, middle-class home, Victorian furniture, an artificial white Christmas tree with a bounty of presents scattered beneath it.

"Yo, hello," Norma called. "Anybody home?" No reply.

"Probably out visiting neighbors. People still do that here. This way."

She led him through a tiled country kitchen to the two-car garage. A red Saturn station wagon occupied the far bay. Near the door, a workbench held recycling bins for plastic and glass. Newspapers were stacked loosely in a pile.

"Most of these will be the *New York Times,*" Norma said, leafing quickly through the stack. "Okay, here's last week's local paper but we want . . . this one, the week before?"

She spread it out and they pored over it together.

"Anything?" she asked. He shook his head and she flipped to the next page, and then the next. Nothing.

"There's the good Father, dedicating the new assembly wing at St. Vincent's," she said. "Next we have basketball scores—"

"Wait!" Ari said sharply, seizing her wrist as she turned the page. Leaning over, he stared at the photograph she'd mentioned. "Who are the people standing with Father Michaud?"

"David and Darlene Genova. They own the paper mill. The new wing is dedicated to his father. Why?"

"Look at the child standing beside Mrs. Genova. How old is she? Six? Seven?"

"I don't know, they've been living in the city, only recently moved back. I don't . . . good lord. The girl looks a lot like Claudine, doesn't she?"

"Spitting image, I'd say. And not at all like her parents. Could that be one coincidence too many?"

"The Genovas are Italian," Norma said. "Some Italians are blond but . . . you're right. She really does resemble Claudine. I remember hearing a rumor, way back when, that Claudine was pregnant. Her sophomore year, I think."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. She probably got a little chubby that spring, and since she was dating Bobby, naturally there were rumors. You know how small towns are."

"Actually I don't. But suppose it wasn't just a rumor? Suppose she had a baby and put it up for adoption. And then saw it again. And realized she'd been conned."

"Conned?" Norma frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Let's say you're a football star with a promising future and your girlfriend turns up pregnant. Whom do you talk to about it?"

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She stared at him. "My God. The other man in the picture, Father Paul. Bobby's uncle."

"Exactly. Only instead of putting the child up for adoption, he gives it to a wealthy family who later just happen to donate a bale of money to the church."

"It's—possible," she admitted. "Bobby and Claudine were Catholic, so abortion was out. But Father Paul? That's hard to believe."

"But not hard to check. Does he have a car?"

"I don't know," she said slowly, "but the parish does. Two of them. Buicks, I think. They're both white."

"Where would they be now?"

St. Vincent's rectory was an older, two-story brown brick Victorian box, across the street from the massive old church. After parking at the curb, Norma trotted up the snowy drive to the converted brick carriage house that served as the garage.

"No point in being subtle," she said. "Father Paul is at the Levelles' and his junior, Father Ricardo, spends the holidays with his family in the city. Can you get this open?"

Unfortunately, the old building had a very modern automatic garage door. Ari tried lifting it. It wouldn't budge.

"This way." Norma led him to the rear and a single window. Dirt on the glass made it effectively blind. Spitting on her palm, she rubbed a peephole in the grime.

"See anything?"

"There's a car inside . . . maybe the front fender is damaged. I can't be sure." She stepped away, making room for him.

"Where?" Ari peered through the smudged circle. "I don't see anything."

"Isn't the front fender dented?"

"Seems to be," he agreed. "But maybe it's just a parking-lot ding." Stripping off his overcoat, he wrapped it around his forearm, then smashed in the window with his elbow.

"What are you doing?" Norma hissed.

"Burglary. Another Prospect Park talent. Compared to murder, it's pretty small potatoes." Using his coat for a shield, he pushed the broken shards aside, then gingerly eased his leg through the opening. "You'd better wait here."

"Not on your life," she said, scrambling nimbly up on the ledge as he squeezed through the broken window. Broken glass crunched under their shoes in the dark.

"Watch your step."

"Watch your own," she said. "I'm better dressed for this than you are."

Stepping cautiously, they moved to the front of the Buick.

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"Parking-lot ding?" Norma asked.

"No," he said, kneeling. "Definitely not." The passenger's side fender was crumpled, its fiberglass bumper shattered.

"Damn. I can't believe it. Or maybe I just don't want to."

A sudden rattle from above froze them in place as the garage door clattered slowly open. A white Buick started into the garage, then halted, blinding them with its halogen headlight glare.

"What's going on here?" Easing his broken ankle out of the car, Father Michaud stood up, leaning on the car door to steady himself. And blocking the exit.

He looked haggard, dressed for bed, wearing a frayed bathrobe over flannel pajamas. His fringe of wispy hair was awry. Ari and Norma moved from behind the car into the light.

"You two," he said grimly. "I should have guessed. What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, Father," Norma said. "We need to talk."

"Yes," Michaud sighed. "I suppose we do."

"We've seen the car," Ari said. "We know what happened, or most of it. We just don't know why."

"Good intentions," Michaud said bitterly. "They say the road to hell is paved with them. I thought it was a joke." He looked away, avoiding their eyes.

"Six years ago . . . or seven? It seems longer. Bobby came to me, said Claudine was pregnant. He was sixteen, she was fifteen." He shook his head.

"When I was a young priest the answer was simple: 'Better to marry than to burn.' But we have so many more . . . options now. And I thought I knew one. David and Darlene Genova were on a waiting list to adopt. They'd gladly take the child, no questions asked, no scandal. Bobby could get on with his life."

"And Claudine went along with this?" Ari asked.

"She was reluctant at first. Perhaps she'd hoped to trap the boy into marriage. But in the end her parents and I managed to convince her it was the right thing to do. For herself and her child."

"And for your nephew and your church," Ari said. "But something went wrong, didn't it? Because she had the baby, but couldn't have any more."

"The delivery was . . . difficult," Father Michaud admitted. "She suffered a uterine rupture, perhaps because she was so young. The baby was healthy and strong, though."

"And that's what mattered, isn't it?" Ari said acidly.

"Ari." Norma touched his arm.

"You don't get it, do you? They didn't tell her! If she'd known she couldn't have any more children she might have changed her mind."

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"That wasn't it," Michaud pleaded. "They were so young. Their futures, everything was ahead of them."

"And there's nothing like a grateful millionaire to brighten the future, is there? Tell me, did any money change hands then? Or did that come later?"

"Bobby . . . received a full college scholarship. Claudine's family just wanted to put it all behind them. They never asked about the arrangements for the child and I . . . left it to them to tell Claudine about what happened during the delivery."

"Knowing they wanted to put it all behind them? How convenient. So what happened the night before last? How did the kids with the bright futures wind up smashed to hell in a ditch?"

"Bobby called me last weekend, said Claudine had seen the picture of the dedication and was convinced it had all been some vile conspiracy, that her parents and I had browbeaten her into giving up her only child in exchange for a new addition. She intended to take legal action to get the baby back and wanted Bobby's help. But . . ."

"But?" Ari prompted.

"Bobby said he could talk Claudine into accepting money instead. He needed it badly, and since the Genovas could certainly afford it, he asked me to arrange a . . . payoff. I told him it was extortion and I'd have no part of it. We argued, and he promised he'd stop by the next day to discuss it further.

"But he didn't. Instead, he contacted the Genovas as soon as we hung up. They called, frantic, nearly out of their minds. I started for their home, driving like a maniac, speeding, hoping to—I don't know what I thought. But a few miles from the Genova estate, I passed a car and realized Bobby was at the wheel.

"I blew the horn, trying to get him to pull over so we could talk. But he waved me off. And I lost control. Of myself and the car." Michaud looked away a moment, his jaw clenching, remembering.

"I tried to force him off the road. I didn't realize where we were, that the embankment was so steep. His car skidded broadside then turned over and. . . disappeared. I stopped, but with my leg in a cast, I couldn't climb down to them. Couldn't even see where they were. So I drove on, found a phone in a party-store parking lot and called nine-one-one. But by the time I got back, the police and an ambulance were already there. So I . . . kept going."

"You didn't even stop?" Norma asked, incredulous.

"I couldn't tell them what happened without telling them why. I wanted to protect the Genovas. None of this was their fault. I still hoped we could work something out. I didn't find out until the next day how badly things had turned out."

"That you'd killed Claudine, you mean," Ari said.

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"As God is my witness, I meant them no harm, Mr. Isackson. I pray you can believe that."

"What we believe doesn't matter so much," Norma said, "but you'll have to talk to Chief Patton about this."

"I already have. I've just come from the hospital. Bobby died half an hour ago. He retracted the statement he made earlier but . . . he refused the last rites. Wouldn't even see me."

"I'm—sorry," Norma said. Ari glanced at her but said nothing. His face was as empty as a death mask.

"There is one thing," Father Michaud continued. "A favor."

"I don't owe you any favors," Ari said.

"It's not for me. It's for the Genovas. None of this was their doing. Losing that child would destroy them."

"Claudine's baby, you mean? The one you sold to them."

"Perhaps that's true," Michaud conceded. "Bobby was my only nephew, that child is my blood. Perhaps I was guilty of wanting her to grow up wealthy and happy instead of in foster care or with struggling parents who were still children themselves. I admit my motives may have been selfish, but that doesn't mean I was wrong. Please, sir, don't cause any more pain here. We have enough already."

Ari walked slowly to where the priest stood blocking the door. Fists clenched, he stared up into Michaud's face.

"I'm not a Christian, Father," he said at last, "but even if I were, you haven't the right to ask me for anything."

"But I am asking. Please."

Ari looked away a moment, then met Michaud's pleading eyes. "All right," he said quietly. "You've said at least one true thing. We've all had pain enough."

"Thank you."

"I'm not doing it for you. Maybe it's the last thing I can do for her. Now get out of my way." Brushing past the older man, he stalked into the night, shoulders hunched, hands thrust deep in his pockets.

Michaud watched him go, then retrieved his crutch from the car and limped painfully across the snowy street to his darkened church. He disappeared inside, but no lights came on.

"Ari! Wait up." Norma overtook him a block later, running to catch up. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know," he said, glancing around as though he'd come through a fog. "I wasn't thinking. I just needed to get away."

"That was a kind thing you did back there."

"Yeah, well," he released a ragged breath. "Maybe this Christmas mitzvah business is catching. Come on, I'll walk you back."

She fell into step beside him and they trudged in silence to her car.

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"Can I give you a lift?" she asked, opening her door.

"No, thanks, I really need to walk. How far is it to the hospital?"

"The hospital? About ten blocks directly east. Why?"

"It's Christmas Eve. A girl shouldn't be alone on such a . . . special night."

"No, I guess not."

"You know what the worst of it is?" he asked quietly. "I still don't know why Claudine came back here. For love or money, for her lost child or her lost childhood. I don't know why she changed her hair or what it meant. I loved her, lived with her for over a year, but I can't honestly say I knew her heart. Isn't that a terrible thing?"

"Not so terrible. In time you probably would have learned those things. But if not, well, I love my parents but I don't know all their secrets or what they talk about in the dark. Maybe that's the miracle, that no one's perfect and somehow we manage to love each other anyway."

"Perhaps you're right," he said, looking away, his eyes misting. "Perhaps that is the miracle."

"Look, I know you won't feel like celebrating but you've got to eat tomorrow and my mom makes the best—"

"Thank you, Miss Deutch, but no. You've already done far too much. And anyway, I won't be fit company tomorrow. Or for a while."

"Well, if you change your mind, we'll be home all day and you'll certainly be welcome. And hey, if you need a contract negotiated, or you just want to talk sometime, call me in the city. We'll have coffee or something."

"I will. And thank you for, well, for everything. Good night."

"Good night." She almost said Merry Christmas but caught herself. Instead, she slid behind the wheel, fired up the Camry, and let it idle, watching Ari trudge off into the night.

A strange man. Bright. Passionate. Probably difficult. And a lot of trouble, she reminded herself. A lot. Yet somehow that didn't matter. She'd had a hunch about Ari from the moment she saw him looking so lost and alone at the train station.

What was it he said about love's nomenclature? "We don't . . . walk into love, or stroll, or even run. We fall. At inconvenient times, and for no rational reason at all, we fall." ●

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Parking-Space Vigilantes

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Stacy crouched beside the Dumpster and watched as the dark blue Suburban, license number AOB 445, made its way through the crowded parking lot. She couldn't see the driver behind the tinted glass, but she knew he had to be searching for her, knew he had to be watching.

She was wearing her jogging shorts and her Bay to Breakers T-shirt. Her ticket book was in her fanny pack, along with her pen and her ID. She clutched a bottle of Gatorade, and waited.

The faint odor of rotted meat blew across her. The nearby Price Choppers wasn't supposed to use this Dumpster, but often did when theirs was full. She hated those days. Usually she could crouch here, waiting for the Suburban, and smell only the paper waste from the various storefronts in the strip mall. Today was clearly different.

A 1998 *EQMM* Readers Award winner, Kristine Kathryn Rusch has a fictional range wider than just about any other author we publish. She is not only an award-winning science fiction writer whose latest honors include Nebula and Homer nominations, she is also becoming a mystery writer of note, and a figure in the romance genre to boot. Ms. Rusch's latest tale for us was inspired by a real ticketing program recently instituted in Washington state.

The Suburban slowed in front of the Mongolian barbecue, and her breath caught in her throat. There was an open parking space—narrow, but possible. Maybe, after fifteen tickets, he had finally learned.

Then the Suburban swerved and took its usual place in the handicapped parking space right in front of JoLe's Stitch and Sew. The passenger side faced Stacy and, although she could hear the driver's side open, she couldn't see the person who got out.

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Not that she was supposed to. The city's police department had instructed the volunteers not to get into confrontations with drivers. *It's dangerous enough for police,* Chief Danvers had said when he was introduced to the new volunteers. *You're untrained.* It had been obvious that he didn't approve of the new program, mandated by the legislature, which allowed volunteers to write $250 citations to any able driver who parked in a handicapped spot.

But the moment Stacy had heard of the program, she'd signed up. She went through the training, which included a day-long self-defense course, and she had been on the street ever since. In the past five months, she had issued seventy citations, most of them spotted on her morning run.

Of the seventy, fifteen had gone to good old AOB 445. He had become her private nemesis. There had to be a number of citations at which even 445 would pay attention.

She got up and brushed the parking-lot dirt off her bare legs. Her knees were cold. It was warm for April, but the air still had a damp chill.

She tossed her Gatorade into the Dumpster and jogged toward the Suburban, unzipping her fanny pack as she went. She stopped in front of the Suburban and pulled out her pen and citation book. The Suburban gleamed, its paint job new, its surface washed and polished. The smoky windshield, which she was sure was not standard, was covered with bugs.

The vehicle was empty and the engine ticked as it cooled. She bit off the cap to her pen and began to write, feeling a mixture of malicious joy at catching him again and anger that he wasn't learning. She had actually complained about him at the station after she had given him his tenth ticket, and the desk sergeant had explained that parking violations didn't count against a driver unless the driver left the violations unpaid. Apparently 445 had paid every ticket he had received.

She ripped off the ticket and was sticking it between the windshield and the driver's-side wiper when someone grabbed her wrist. The grip was hard and firm, pinching the bones together, cutting off the circulation.

"So you're the bitch who's been costing me," a man's voice said.

She didn't move and worked to keep her voice calm, just like she had been instructed. "Let me go, please."

"Not till you take that ticket back."

She couldn't see his face, only a shape reflected in the shiny polish on the hood. He smelled of coffee and cologne, and the hand gripping her was manicured.

"I can't take the ticket back, sir," she said. All trained words. She had practiced them in front of the mirror until they became rote.

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She was glad she had. "I am a volunteer with the police department under the program instituted by the state. We're in charge of issuing handicapped parking citations. Did you realize you were parking in a handicapped zone?"

"You don't look like a cop," he said, his voice against her ear.

"I'm not." She felt her heart rate increase, but she worked to control her breathing, just like she would at the end of a long race. "I'm a volunteer with the department. We have the authority to issue—"

"I got that," he said. "But you're not a cop."

"I don't have that authority, no," she said. "But any kind of assault against me when I'm doing my duties will be prosecuted as if you were assaulting a police officer."

He let go of her as if he had been burned. She turned. Half of his face was obscured by aviator sunglasses. He was white, a few inches taller than she was, and slightly thick through the middle. His red hair had a stylish cut, and he wore a tasteful gray suit. His sunglasses didn't quite go with the package, the reflective lenses a bit too Hollywood for the Northwest. She saw two copies of herself in them, a slight, wiry, dark-haired woman with wider than usual brown eyes.

"Just don't park in the handicapped spots anymore, sir," she said, "and you won't get any tickets."

"I never got any until you came along."

She nodded. "The police department is understaffed for this sort of thing. That's why they're using us."

"I can park wherever I want."

"Actually, no," she said. "These are restricted—"

"I don't care," he said. "I should be able to park wherever I want."

"Sir, have you ever been with a disabled person? Do you know how—"

"I don't care about your freaking politics," he said. "I just don't want your filthy hands on my car again. Is that clear?"

She swallowed. The dual faces reflected on the lenses looked a bit startled, maybe even frightened. "Is that a threat, sir?" she asked.

He made a sound of disgust, grabbed the ticket, and opened his car door. It swung so hard in her direction that it would have hit her if she hadn't stepped backwards. He started the Suburban, and she backed away as its engine roared. She thought she saw him grin through the smoky glass, then he backed up and sped out of the parking lot.

She waited until he turned onto Fischer Road before she sat down on the curb. Her entire body was shaking. She had never been so terrified in her life.

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"Are you all right, miss?" a man asked. He was small, bald, of indeterminate age. He spoke with a slight European accent. He stood in the door of the dry cleaner's next to the sewing shop.

"I think so," she said.

"He looked angry."

"He did, didn't he?"

"But you're all right?"

"Yes," she said. "Thank you."

The man let himself back in the shop.

She clutched her wrist. It ached. She moved it around. 445 hadn't broken anything, but bruises were already beginning to start. She had to report this. She winced. This was the very thing that Chief Danvers had mentioned when he met the volunteers. It would give him, and people like him, ammunition in shutting down the program.

But if she didn't report it, and things got worse, that would be ammunition, too. And Jones would take care of it. Lieutenant Everett Jones liked the program. He saw it as a way to solve a problem that he believed was growing worse.

With a sigh, she got to her feet, stretched, and continued her morning jog, taking a detour from the usual route to stop at the police station.

Stacy arrived at the station out of breath, her legs aching. She had forgotten how far it was, and she had also forgotten about the winding hill that the station sat on top of.

The police station was a gray and glass 1950s monstrosity that somehow managed to survive two riots and one disgruntled sharpshooter. The city kept replacing the front windows, now made of bulletproof glass, but could never find the funds to build a new police station. She walked past the rows of bicycle racks—used only by the bike patrols—and let herself in the double doors.

Behind yet another wall of bulletproof glass sat the desk sergeant. She was tall and built like a wrestler, her wiry blond hair badly in need of a comb. She smiled when she saw Stacy, and slowly that smile turned into a frown.

"You all right?" the sarge asked.

Stacy nodded. "I do need to make a report, though."

The sarge buzzed Stacy into the back. Stacy steeled her shoulders and made her way through the narrow corridor that led to the offices. She didn't really want to see Jones. He had made it clear when she was training that he was interested. She hadn't been, not because he was unattractive, but because she wasn't ready. She didn't know if she'd ever want a relationship again.

Jones's position as head of the volunteer traffic division entitled him to one of the tiny offices toward the back, paid for by the

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state. He was a cop but, he had once told her, he appreciated the privacy that the office provided. He didn't like mingling in the squad room, trying to deal with the chaos and do his job.

She rapped on the frosted glass of his open door. Jones looked up. He had an angular face, not handsome, but strong. His blue eyes seemed to see everything.

"You all right, Stace?" he asked.

She nodded and slipped inside. One scarred wooden chair sat across from the desk, piled high with thick Manila file folders. Behind Jones was a single window that opened onto the parking lot. His ancient computer hummed on the desk. He pushed his chair back to watch her come in.

"So what is it?" he asked, and she told him. Jones frowned as he listened, examined Stacy's wrist, and sighed.

"I was afraid this would happen eventually," he said. "I'm sorry it had to be to you."

"It's all right," she said, even though it wasn't. Retelling the story raised an anger she hadn't realized she was feeling. "Why can't you just arrest this guy?"

"We will now," Jones said. "Assaulting you is enough to bring him in. I can't guarantee he'll stay, though."

"I reported him before. Ten violations. I don't understand why his license wasn't taken away."

Jones punched the computer keyboard and pulled up a screen. "He's been paying his fines. We can't do anything to a man's license based on parking violations. We need moving violations for that, and on those he's clean."

"Who is he?" Stacy asked.

Jones looked at her around the screen. "You know better than that."

"I just figured, since he and I have had an encounter, I have a right to know."

Jones smiled slightly. "Nice try. But you're in charge of the tickets. If you find out who the perp is, if they tell you, fine. Otherwise, you need to let this go. It makes for an easier time in court."

Stacy sighed. She had hated that rule from the beginning, but Jones had explained, during training, why it was in place. Chief Danvers didn't believe in the new legislation creating the volunteers. He was afraid volunteers would take matters into their own hands, following a car home, issuing verbal warnings, doing things no trained officer would ever do.

"I don't get it," she said. "Any sane person would stop using the handicapped spaces. You'd think after that many fines—"

"Damn near four thousand dollars' worth," Jones muttered.

"—he'd give up."

"Some folks get stubborn. They think it's a minor thing, and

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they're being harassed, so they get belligerent instead of changing. Street cops see it all the time." Jones pushed away from the desk with one hand. His chair squeaked. "Maybe you should lay off him awhile. I'll send a traffic cop to the area. What time did you say he does this?"

"It's not every day, but when he does, it's between eight and nine, and it's always the same spot." She shivered. The sweat had dried on her skin, and she was not dressed for the regulated temperatures inside the station. "Of course, I don't know where he works. He might use the handicapped spot there as well."

"He's probably just a rich bastard who figures the world exists for him. You're getting in the way of his convenient parking space."

"Yeah," she said. "Maybe."

"You know," Jones said, "it sounds like it's getting personal for you, too. Maybe you should lay off a little, not worry so much about this guy. Pick a new route. I bet you'll find a dozen new violators."

"I like my route," she said.

"I don't like the way this guy treated you," Jones said. "Let it rest awhile."

"But you said you'd bring him in."

"And I said I wasn't sure how long we could hold him. You do an ID, he's got bail money—which he probably does—and bango, he and his fancy handgun are waiting for you at his favorite handicap space. I don't want that on my conscience."

She shivered again, but this time it wasn't from the cold. "You think he'd do that?"

"I been in this job a long time, Stace," Jones said. "I seen things that most folks couldn't imagine. Which is a long way of saying, yeah, I think he just might."

"I don't get it. Why would a man like that defend a parking space?"

"Why do you?" Jones asked.

She looked at him. "I'm keeping it clear for people who need it."

"Maybe he figures he does."

"I *saw* him. He's not disabled."

Jones placed a finger beneath her palm and gently lifted her hand. The wrist had turned black and blue with bits of purple. Fingermarks were clearly visible against her pale skin. "You don't question it, Stace," Jones said. "You just figure it's as important to him as it is to you."

She stared at her bruises. Jones flattened his palm beneath hers, then squeezed her fingers lightly. "Come on," he said. "Let's get a picture of that for the D. A. We'll do the best we can to make a case against this guy stick."

But she knew he had said that last just to placate her. He had been right before. If 445, whoever he was, had enough money that

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he'd keep paying fines rather than alter his behavior, he would have enough cash to make bail.

He had a different agenda, and for the life of her, she couldn't figure out what it was.

Stacy knew what her agenda was. She made a joke of it when people asked. She was a Parking-SpaceVigilante, protecting her small corner of the world from the insensitive, the stupid, and the just plain ignorant. She couldn't do much to affect things around her, but she could do this.

But beneath the joke was a bit of the truth. She was protecting her corner of the world. The legislature had given her the opportunity, and she had taken it. It was the least she could do.

Her life was quiet otherwise. She owned a small graphic design company that had mostly local, mostly familiar, accounts. Her work left her time for her running, which she did with a single-minded intensity. She had a lot of friends, but most of them were runners, and most she had met in out-of-town events. She exchanged a lot of e-mail, did a lot of visiting when she traveled, and often saw no one but her running partners when she was home. She hadn't been close to anyone since Colin was alive.

Colin. He'd contracted polio when he was five, spent the next year in an iron lung, and emerged on his seventh birthday, muscles atrophied, unable to walk, but alive. *All that matters,* he used to say when someone asked him about the experience, *is that I survived.*

His life had been so different from hers. She hadn't realized it until his car broke down shortly after she met him. He asked her to take him to a few doctor's appointments in her van. Apparently she had been the only person he knew with a vehicle large enough to accommodate him and his scooter.

She drove him everywhere, hanging the blue and white temporary handicapped permit from her rearview mirror, and helping him when he would let her. He was a large man with a massive upper body and stick-thin legs, a warm laugh, and the kindest eyes she had ever seen. Only, when she had to help him from the car, or when she had to walk an extra block with him just so that he could use the curbless ramp that allowed him to take his scooter from street to sidewalk, those eyes turned away from her, hard and dull and lifeless. He had been embarrassed by the struggle, and determined to do everything himself.

After a time, she had accepted that.

But from then on, she saw the little indignities, the way he struggled to survive in a world that didn't suit him, how even going in and out of a building became a chore. As their friendship grew, she came to appreciate the sense of humor that had become his armor, the way he could look at the smallest problem and see

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how funny it could be. As they became lovers, she shared the irony with him: *She runs,* he used to say as a way of deflecting questions, *so I don't have to.*

That afternoon, Jones called. They had picked up 445 and had him at the station. They wanted her to come down and choose him out of a lineup.

She had done that before, when she had seen one of her violators hold up a liquor store. The drill was familiar to her—the small room, the one-way glass, the look-alikes paraded in as if they had all done something wrong.

Still, she recognized 445 right away, even though he wasn't wearing his aviator shades. Something about his chin, his posture, clued her, but it was his styled red hair and manicured hands, so obviously soft even from her vantage, that gave him away.

The next morning, she started on her usual run, but changed her mind. Instead, she went in the opposite direction, going downhill to start, and then running the track near the high school. The route wasn't as fulfilling as her usual one, but she agreed with Jones: There was no reason to tempt fate. Chances were 445 had gotten off on bail, and he would be looking for her, waiting for her. Besides, Jones had promised to post a black-and-white near 445's usual handicapped spot. The real police would take care of this.

For two weeks, she ran the new route, knowing she wasn't getting the workout she wanted. But she hadn't gotten the workout she wanted for nearly two years. The best route wasn't east to the strip mall or west to the high school, but south to the winding river paths just off the highway. She never went in that direction. Colin had died there, near the turnoff into Gidana Park, and every time she ran past, she saw the scooter, a hunk of twisted metal against the sewer grate, and Colin crumpled in the middle of the road. She didn't even drive that route anymore.

So she stayed with her unsatisfying workout. Jones had warned her that 445 might not go to trial for six months, maybe a year, and Stacy had to find a new route before that. She finally decided to drive across town, pick up some of the riverside trails from one of the other parks. If she liked that route, she could park her car in one of the city lots and make the round trip in a neighborhood she hadn't run through before.

With her car, she mapped out a route that would take her the normal five miles of her easy jaunt. She would do her longer route closer to home. The route was half on the roads leading to the river and half in Riverside Park. When she scoped the area out, she saw other runners, a lot of women alone, and cyclists, and knew this was the path for her.

She tried it on a Wednesday morning. The sun was bright, and

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the birds were chirping. The air had warmed considerably and promised a hot day ahead. She parked her car in the city lot, in the corner nearest the park, put her keys in her fanny pack along with her ticket book, pen, and identification. She grabbed her Gatorade and tucked it in the loop specially made for water bottles on her pack. After a few stretches, she was ready to go.

Running in a new neighborhood always made her nervous. Houses she didn't recognize, strange faces, dogs that could be friendly or hostile were all potential hazards on this first run. She went against traffic along Riverside Parkway, and then turned onto a side street that provided her the best coverage to the park.

There was almost no traffic here, and an excellent trail next to the shoulder on the right. She crossed the road and took the trail, happy to be on soft dirt instead of asphalt. A drainage ditch was between the path and the lawns, a ditch flanked by trees that stood like sentries on the roadside. The only houses were tucked way back on large lots with long driveways leading to them.

It was the old section of town, which had once been the wealthy section, and it still had that nineteenth-century quietness. She was beginning to relax into the run, to enjoy the sound of her own breathing, her feet pounding the dirt, when she heard an engine roar behind her.

If she hadn't been slightly on alert anyway, if she hadn't been watching for dogs and other unexpected hazards, she wouldn't have turned when she did. She saw the wide front bumper of a dark blue Suburban bearing down on her and she leapt toward the drainage ditch. The Suburban caught her right foot, twisting it sideways and back, slamming her against the muddy wall of the ditch and down into the dirty water.

Pain shot through her. Above her, she heard the Suburban's engine fade as he drove away.

The water was icy cold. Her heart was pounding. She had to get out of the ditch before he came back. She glanced up. The walls of the ditch were too high to get out of easily, and she couldn't run once she reached the top anyway. She knew this pain. It was too sharp, too excruciating, to be anything simple.

She listened for a long moment, and heard only silence. The same silence she had heard before. The silence she had enjoyed.

She brought her good leg beneath her, used her arms to push herself onto that foot, and bit back a scream as some of her weight went to her injured ankle. Standing, her head barely came out of the ditch. He would have been a fool if he had tried to drive down here. Maybe he had other plans. Jones's words echoed through her mind.

You do an ID, he's got bail money—which he probably does—and bango, he and his fancy handgun are waiting for you at his favorite handicap space.

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She didn't know how he had found her here. This wasn't her regular route.

But she was wearing her regular clothes. Her jogging shorts, her T-shirt, her fanny pack. He would have recognized her. He had seen her, followed her, taken his chance.

She moaned, put her hands on the tree-side of the bank, and pulled herself up. The house down the lawn looked like it was fifty miles away. Maybe a hundred. Maybe two hundred. She had to get there. She couldn't remain here waiting for him to come back.

She started to hop, felt the pain each time her body jolted, and then decided that her pride wasn't worth the agony. She eased herself on her stomach and half-pulled, half-crawled across that thousand-mile expanse of well-tended grass.

By the time she reached the newly painted front porch, black spots were dancing in front of her eyes. She managed to pull herself up the steps and pound on the screen door before she passed out.

When she came to in a white and gold hospital room, with a rerun of *Happy Days* blaring on the television set behind her roommate's vomit-green curtain, it was Jones who sat beside her bed. He looked haggard, as if he hadn't slept in days, and he wore civilian clothes, which made him seem shorter somehow. He was the one who told her that her right leg had been snapped in four places, that her leg had to be elevated for several days, and that running was out of the question, at least for the next few months.

"Did you get him?" she asked when Jones had finished, not wanting to think about what he'd said.

"No one saw the accident," Jones said. "You were incoherent when Mrs. Tysel opened the door."

"I saw the accident," Stacy said. "It was the Suburban. He rammed me."

"He followed you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I heard his engine, turned, and saw him, right at the moment of impact."

"You were incoherent," Jones said.

She shook her head. "Not then. Not for a while. I landed in the ditch. I remember crawling across the lawn."

"The Suburban," Jones said. "You're sure."

"Positive," she said.

He nodded. "You'll get out in a week. I'll tell the D.A. I have a hunch he'll want to see you."

The district attorney's office was a reminder of how things hadn't changed. Jones had driven Stacy there—he was being kinder than friendship required—and she had found the ride in his squad car painful. She wore a cast that ran from her thigh to her foot, filled

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with steel rods and wire to hold it in place. The accident hadn't just snapped her leg, it had created microfractures all through the bones. So for them to heal, she had to keep her leg completely immobile, a task that was proving harder than she thought.

The D. A.'s office was on the fifth floor. Even with her crutches, she still found the trip hazardous. The elevator had a metal lip in front of its door. The hallways weren't very wide, and every doorway had a wooden threshold.

Reginald Bentley, the D. A., was waiting for them. He, at least, had had someone bring in a wide upholstered chair that had enough room for Stacy's cast. She must have turned pale from the long walk through the narrow hallways; Jones was hovering, continually asking her if she was all right.

Bentley was a thin man, so thin he reminded her of a twig. He didn't look that spindly on television. His dark hair was receding, and he wore tiny round glasses that gave his bony face a look of intelligence that it probably wouldn't have had without them.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Hill," Bentley said. "If I had known how much pain you were in, I would have come to you."

She was breathing hard, and that embarrassed her. A little over a week ago, she had been in perfect shape. Now she couldn't get across a building without exhausting herself.

"It's all right," she said. "I'm still not used to the cast."

Bentley glanced at Jones, and she didn't like the look. It communicated something—annoyance? regret?—that she wasn't quite able to catch.

"I understand you believe you were hit by Peter Taylor. Do you want to tell me what you can remember?"

Peter Taylor. A name, finally. An innocuous one. Who would think someone named Peter Taylor could be so malicious?

She squared her shoulders, told Bentley of her accident, and her memory of the Suburban. Then she started recounting her earlier run-in with Taylor, but Bentley held up his hand to stop her.

"I have the file on that," he said. "And frankly, some of this troubles me."

A pain shot through her leg, and she clamped her jaw together so that she would have no visible reaction. The shooting pains were common, the doctors told her, at least for the first few weeks. No sense in letting Bentley think that she was responding to his words.

"It should bother you," Jones said. He was standing behind her, still hovering. "This guy's a pig."

"You'll get no argument with me on that." Bentley leaned against the desk and crossed his arms. "The problem is that I don't think we can pursue this case."

"What?" Stacy said.

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"I've been going over the file. Did you see his license number when he hit you, Ms. Hill?"

"No," she said. "He came at me from behind."

"Then how did you know you were hit by a Suburban? You said you flattened yourself and dove for the ditch. You couldn't have seen a car from that position."

"Reg," Jones said.

Bentley shot Jones a warning look.

"I told you," Stacy said. "I heard the engine and looked over my shoulder."

"Seconds before," Bentley said.

"Yes," Stacy said.

"Isn't it true that in the blur of an accident, you only saw the general size, shape, and color of the vehicle and assumed it was a Suburban?"

"No," she said. "What are you doing? I thought you were going to go after this guy."

Bentley sighed and shook his head once, a very small movement, almost as if he were reluctant to show it. "That's my point, Ms. Hill. There were no other witnesses."

"Surely you could find a dent on his Suburban," she said. "He hit me hard enough to destroy my leg."

Bentley glanced at her cast, then his gaze moved back to her eyes. "You want to answer that, Lieutenant?"

Behind her, Jones sighed. "I went to see Taylor after we found you," he said. "The vehicle was newly washed and there were no dents. But those SUVs have huge bumpers and it didn't hit you straight on. Chances are, even if he did hit you, the accident wouldn't have damaged the vehicle in any meaningful way."

Stacy was shaking, although she didn't know if it was from anger or exhaustion or both. "But you already have the case against him, right? The one he made bail on."

"I'm thinking," Bentley said softly, "of dropping those charges."

"What?" Stacy half turned in her chair to look at Jones's face, then winced as another pain shot through her leg. "You agree with him?"

"No," Jones said. "But he's done this to me before."

"The problem, Ms. Hill, is that this entire case is based on your word against his, and frankly, I don't think we can win this."

"Why not?" Stacy asked. "He had fifteen parking violations. He bruised my wrist. Jones took pictures of the injury. He threatened me, forgodsake. This guy is a menace."

"Yes, he is," Bentley said. "But he's also a rich menace who can afford a good attorney."

"So what?" she asked. "Does that mean rich people don't need to be prosecuted?"

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"No," Bentley said, "but there are only so many cases my office can afford to prosecute. We have to pick cases we believe we can win."

"So win this one."

"It's not that easy," Bentley said. "I'm sorry, Ms. Hill, but a good attorney would eat you for lunch."

Stacy's heart was pounding like it had when she had been running from the Suburban. "You can't be sure of that."

"I'm a good attorney," Bentley said. "I've been looking at the files. I can show you exactly how he'd do it."

"Sure," she said, bracing herself.

"Stace, I don't think this is such a good idea," Jones said. "You're still recuperating. Reg, don't do this."

"I have a hunch Ms. Hill wants to prove that I'm wrong," Bentley said.

"You are," Stacy said.

Bentley glanced at Jones again. There was no malice in this look, only a bit of sorrow, as if he'd dealt with recalcitrant people before and disliked it. "All right, Ms. Hill. Remember that you will have taken an oath to tell the truth."

"I'll tell you the truth," she said. There was an edge in her voice she hadn't ever heard before.

Bentley cleared his throat, then stood. He suddenly looked formidable, a branch instead of a twig. "Ms. Hill, would you please tell the court how you describe your volunteer position with the police department?"

She swallowed. The cadences of his voice were different, formal, as if they really were in a courtroom. She took a deep breath and said, "I'm a volunteer with the ability to write two-hundred-fifty-dollar citations to anyone who parks illegally in a handicapped zone."

"No, Ms. Hill," Bentley said. "How do you jokingly refer to your volunteer position?"

Her face heated. She couldn't control the flush, and she knew it was a deep one. "I call myself a Parking-Space Vigilante."

"Vigilante," he repeated softly, turning to Jones, who was apparently playing the part of a juror.

Jones grunted. Stacy heard disgust in the sound.

"You used to live with a man named Colin Penhall," Bentley said. "Is that right?"

"Yes," she said.

"He died two years ago?"

"Yes." Damn the flush. It was so deep it burned into her skin.

"He was considered disabled, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"What was wrong with him?"

"He had polio as a child. It took most of the use of his legs."

"And he had a handicapped license plate."

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She swallowed. "Yes."

"Maybe this shouldn't go any further." Jones put a hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you stop, Stace?"

She shook her head. She was in the middle of this. She still wasn't convinced that Bentley was right.

"How did Mr. Penhall die?"

A shiver ran through her that Jones obviously felt. He squeezed her shoulder as if in reassurance. "He was in an intersection," she said, "crossing with the light. A car ran a red and killed him."

There was a time when she couldn't say that so calmly.

"But Mr. Penhall shouldn't have been in that intersection, should he, Ms. Hill? At least that's what you said to the local paper that day, didn't you?"

Her back hurt. Her leg hurt. She wanted to move around. "Yes," she whispered. "I said that."

"Why did you say that?"

"Because he was going to the park, and the lot was full, so he had to park his car on the street."

"That isn't all of it, though, is it, Ms. Hill? What other factor was involved? What made you tell that reporter that Mr. Penhall shouldn't have been in that intersection?"

"The handicapped parking spots were full, too," she said.

"Filled with what kind of car?" he asked.

"I don't know the make and model," she said, deliberately misunderstanding him.

"But you do know something specific about those cars," he said. "What is it?"

She took a deep breath. "They were illegally parked. Their owners weren't handicapped."

"The Parking-Space Vigilante," he said, and nodded toward her. "Thank you."

Her whole body was shaking. Jones hadn't taken his hand from her shoulder. The warmth of his palm kept her upright.

"Jesus," Jones said. "Was that necessary?"

Maybe it was. She had thought she could stand up to anything. But Bentley had just shown her how her own words could be twisted to prove an entirely different point.

Bentley ignored Jones and crouched before her. "I'm sorry, Ms. Hill. I was going light. Any attorney Taylor hires will do that and more. A jury will think you targeted Taylor, that you shouldn't have been chosen as a volunteer for the program."

"She's one of our best," Jones said.

"I don't doubt that," Bentley said. "But that's not the issue. The issue is whether or not we take this case to court. And I don't think we can."

"You only take cases you can win?" she asked, her voice shaky.

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She willed it to behave. She willed her entire body to behave, but she felt as if she had lost control of it since the accident.

"I have to draw a line somewhere," Bentley said.

"A sure thing is where you draw the line? Can't you trust that a jury will see through Taylor and his attorney?"

Bentley shook his head. "Personally, I believe you, Ms. Hill, and I think we need to get Taylor off the street. But we have to do it in a way that will stick."

"And my word against his won't stick."

"I'm sorry."

She glanced at Jones. "No one else saw the accident? No one saw him hit me?"

He shook his head. "We couldn't find anyone, Stace. Sorry."

"So what do we do?" she asked. "Let him go on with his life, feeling free to terrorize people whenever he wants to?"

"We keep a close eye on him," Jones said. "We hope he slips up again, and this time we catch him."

"We caught him the last time," she said. "I caught him."

She grabbed her crutches and struggled out of the chair. Bentley reached for her, to help her, and she shook her head hard. She didn't want his help.

"What happens to me now?" she asked. "He'll keep coming after me."

"I doubt it," Bentley said. "I think the attack on you near Riverside Way was a spur-of-the-moment thing. He'll find someone else to target his rage on soon."

"And maybe we'll get lucky," she said, swinging her way to the door. "Maybe he'll kill that person and there'll be a witness. A murder case. One you can win."

"Ms. Hill—"

"Spare me," she said, and made her slow way into the narrow hall. It was hard to maneuver, she was shaking so hard. She wanted to run away from that office, but she couldn't.

She couldn't run anymore.

Jones caught up with her. "He does that to us all the time."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"It's supposed to make us work harder, I guess."

She looked at him. He seemed younger, a little vulnerable. "Do you agree with him? Do you think Taylor will come after me?"

"No," Jones said. "He doesn't know who you are. We don't give out the names of our volunteers, and we kept your name out of the papers when the accident happened. He knows you by sight, by your jogging clothes, probably. He won't come after you again."

"Until I start running again."

"Maybe by then, we'll have him."

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She stared at Jones. They both knew that would probably never happen.

He drove her home and she almost invited him in. But she was in pain, and she wanted to be alone, and she was so angry she wanted to take it out on anyone near.

Her home was a small bungalow near her design shop. The bungalow had been remodeled with Colin in mind, and the wide doors, the flat floors without rugs that bunched, the single level, all made her life easier now. She didn't need a caretaker to help her get around, like the doctors first thought she would.

She stood in the kitchen. It had been built with Colin in mind. The sink and counters were low, so that they could be reached from a wheelchair. The refrigerator and stove were larger models she bought after Colin had died.

They spent a lot of time in this room, Colin cooking something scrumptious, and Stacy sitting by the large windows which overlooked her garden. She looked at the garden now. The spring flowers were just beginning to emerge. A birdbath sat in the middle of her flowerbed and a robin splashed in the water.

Vigilante. She couldn't get Bentley's voice out of her head. *Parking-Space Vigilante.* She had been making a joke. Everyone knew that. She had been making a joke.

Vigilantes were people who took the law into their own hands, to see that their own brand of justice, right or wrong, was carried out. She wasn't a vigilante.

Peter Taylor was.

She shivered. He was the one who believed the laws didn't apply to him, and when she pointed that out with ticket after ticket, he had gone after her. He was angry at her for interfering with his life, and he had devised his own punishment for her, something he felt was just. He used his vehicle to punish her, just as she was using it—at least in his twisted mind—to punish him.

She would never forget that first encounter, seeing her own face reflected small in his aviator lenses. His anger had frightened her. She had never carried mace on her runs, but she had after that.

And she hadn't been overreacting. It had become personal, yes, but not because of Colin's death. Maybe that was why she volunteered in the first place, maybe that was why she worked as hard as she did. But the fight with Taylor had become personal because she couldn't believe how stubborn he was, or understand why he kept fighting for a cause that showed him so obviously in the wrong.

Even the old man had found Taylor outrageous. The old man—

Her breath caught in her throat. The old man. She hadn't remembered him. Until now.

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"Nice work," Jones said the next morning. He was seated at her kitchen table, drinking a mug filled with strong black tea because she didn't have any coffee. He looked at home there, his legs stretched out before him, his head leaning against the back of the chair.

Stacy was standing—once she had gotten used to the crutches pushing on her pits, it was actually more comfortable than sitting down. "I didn't do anything."

"You remembered the old guy. That helped. Bentley's going to make a case against Taylor after all."

"For assaulting me?"

"While you were writing the ticket." Jones turned to her. "Sorry. We still can't find anyone to verify the hit and run."

She swallowed. "What'll Taylor get if he's convicted?"

"Dunno. Might be the same as assaulting a police officer. Might just be community service. But what he will get is continued vigilance from the department, just like he has been getting since he touched you. A guy doesn't touch one of our own without hearing about it one way or another."

Her arms were getting tired after all. She made her way to a chair. "What do you mean?"

Jones shrugged. "He's got three more tickets since you were in the hospital. And he's been stopped a lot—mostly let off with warnings, but we managed to catch him speeding yesterday."

"You were doing this without Bentley?"

"Like I said, the D. A. can only prosecute so many cases. He picks the ones he can win. We pick the ones we can stop."

"You think Taylor's scared?"

"Not yet," Jones said. "But he will be. The thing is, him and that car, they're like a team. Whenever he gets behind the wheel, he forgets there's other folks in the world. As long as he does that, we'll watch him."

"Is that legal?" she asked.

"As long as he keeps making violations, sure."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then Bentley's got him. That old dry cleaner, he was scared to death by the look on Taylor's face. Said he saw murder there." Jones sipped his tea and studied her for a moment. Then he said, "You know, you won't get an apology from Bentley for treating you that way in his office."

"I know."

"But don't be surprised if he asks you about your accident on the stand."

"I thought he wasn't going to prosecute that."

"He won't. But like he showed you, it's all in what the witness will say. All you have to do is be honest."

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"Honest?" she asked.

Jones nodded. "When he asks you how you broke your leg, you can say—"

"That I was in a hit-and-run accident when I was jogging. A dark blue Suburban speeding on a side street slammed into me."

Jones leaned his head back. "You got it now. That same jury, the one that wouldn't listen to you before, would hear that and put it in the back of their minds. Taylor's lawyer won't like it, but he won't be able to do anything about it since you didn't accuse anybody."

She sighed. She wanted to go back to issuing citations and not worrying about court. Court, with its games and its emphasis on winning and losing, was not a place she wanted to be.

"I'd still like to volunteer for the department," she said, "if you'll have me. I may not be a reliable witness. I have vigilante leanings, I guess."

"Vigilante my ass," Jones said. "It was a court argument."

"Still, it might be again."

Jones shook his head. "You're the best we got, girl. If we had more who cared like you did, this program might work."

"To the chief's dismay."

"To his delight. Keeps his officers going after more important things. He was just worried, you know, about the kind of dangers we were putting citizens in." Jones took his mug and cradled it against his chest. "And maybe now I'm worried about that too."

"Because of me?"

"Because of Taylor."

She ran a hand over her cast. It still felt strange, something hard and plastic where her skin should be. Did Taylor make her afraid? Of course. But he made her afraid of him, not of doing her volunteer work.

"I'm not worried," she said. "People are complex, but most of them aren't mean."

"Don't know how you can say that, sitting there, unable to run," Jones said.

She looked at the sink, lowered so that someone in a wheelchair could use it. If she closed her eyes, she could still see Colin there, whipping up one of his famous three-course dinners. "I guess I learned from a friend that you don't look back on the bad. You just try to make things better."

"Sounds like your friend was an idealist," Jones said.

She shook her head. Colin would be grinning, winking at her, sharing the joke.

"Oh no," she said. "He was no idealist. He understood reality better than anyone I'd ever met." ●

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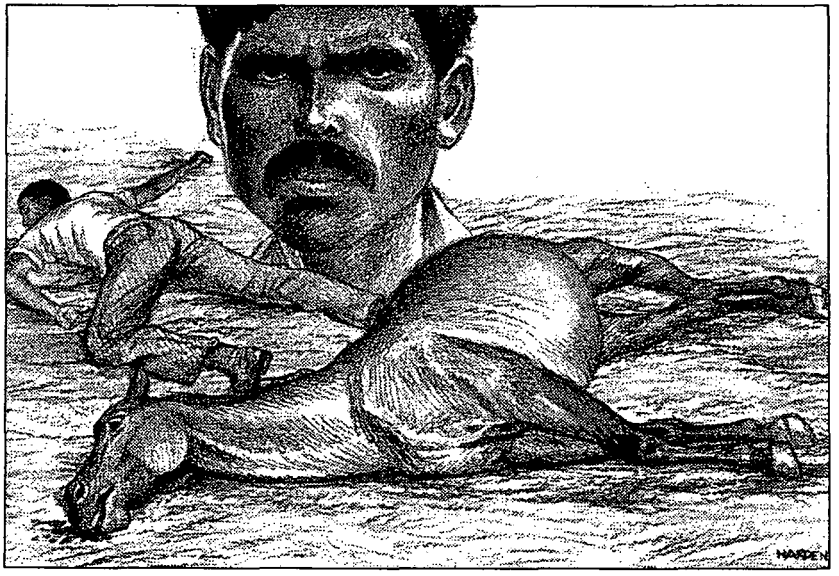

Art by Laurie Harden

AVITAR

by John F. Dobbyn

The greatest gift the Lord can give a lawyer is a total stranger for a client. Teymour Salaam was no gift. He was, in fact, the closest thing to a brother I've experienced. We met as opponents in a debating match at Harvard during our first year. The match ended in a draw, and we appealed the decision to a parking lot behind Memorial Hall. One intemperate Arab and one hot-blooded Puerto Rican took the issue to the bricks, as they say in South Boston. We left bloodstains on the pavement that remained long after we forgot the issue. And we took every class together from that day on.

Teymour had one eccentricity that upstaged his many others. If he had been born an Englishman, he would have aptly been named "Philip—Lover of Horses." In one of normal means, his consuming passion would have been labeled an obsession. But in one of immeasurable family wealth, it passed for an occupation. He spent the lifetime that I knew him gathering from the four winds the swiftest and fairest of the breed.

His first love, naturally, was Arabian show horses. A close second

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was his stable of race horses, imported mostly from the northern reaches of Europe. In fact, on a particularly chilly Monday morning in October, instead of squeezing every precious second of slumber out of the alarm clock, I was breathing clouds of fog out of each nostril at the mile-long racetrack on Teymour's estate north of Boston. A hotshot three-year-old filly had been flown in from Belgium the night before, and Teymour's excitement needed sharing with a kindred spirit.

The fourth of John F. Dobbyn's Michael Knight and Lex Devlin tales (issues 6/94, 10/95, 4/98) finds the old war-horse Devlin and his protégé Knight in a new legal practice of their own, specializing, as before, in criminal law. The lure of horse racing is still strong for the team. The author is drawing from his own experience here: he is a lawyer and long-time horse owner. ‡

We huddled over steaming Styrofoam cups while Mohammed, the latest of three generations of horse gurus to the Salaam family, saw to the saddling and prepping of Avitar. Teymour's excitement was, as always, boundless and contagious. By six o'clock, I was expecting the horse to prance onto the track. The pale death mask on the face of the stable hand who galloped a stable pony up to and nearly over us broke the mood like an egg.

I caught none of the Arabic the boy stuttered out before Teymour broke into an open sprint in the direction of the stables. I could never keep up with him, but when I rounded the door into the room of stalls, I felt the breath suddenly squeezed out of me. Half the floor was coated with a sticky crimson liquid. The large door of the stall that was the source of the gushing liquid was wide open. Inside the stall, a horse that was coated with its own fluid was lying still and frozen on its side. I could just see through the cluster of stable hands gathered around that the horse had hemorrhaged violently from its back end until it had no more life-blood to give.

I looked for Teymour and found him with Mohammed in the front right corner of the stall, bent over the unconscious body of a young boy. They had turned him on his stomach to tend an open gash on the back of his head. I could just catch sight of the contorted profile of Bobby Williams. I knew the tears that moistened Teymour's face were partly for the horse, but mostly for the sixteen-year-old boy with his horse-passion that he had pulled out of the black ghetto of Roxbury to be his protégé.

Someone had called for an ambulance for Bobby and a truck for the horse. The call to the police was my idea. The locals arrived in short order and conducted the kind of courteous, no-feathers-ruffled crime-scene examination you might expect in a community that worked like a gentlemen's club.

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I made it a point to be there when the statements of Teymour, Mohammed, and the stableboys were taken. Teymour knew no more than I did, but Mohammed was the first on the scene. He was choking on his own emotions, but he pieced together what he knew. He said that when he came into the barn at first light, he saw blood spilling under the door of the stall. The door was bolted from the inside, but he forced it open with a pitchfork. I had noticed that the latch on the inside was forced away from the woodwork. Mohammed said that he saw Bobby lying on the floor, unconscious. The gash on the back of his head appeared to be the result of a kick from the horse.

The filly had clearly hemorrhaged violently from the birth canal, but there was nothing to indicate what had brought it on.

The local boys in blue acceded to the demand of Teymour and Mohammed that the interrogation be cut short so that they could ride in the ambulance with Bobby. The anguish on both of their faces was difficult to refuse.

I was still in advanced shock when I reached our recently established law offices of Devlin and Hunter. My usual custom was to bring black coffee, white donuts, and a synopsis of the cases pending that week to my senior partner, Lex Devlin, an aging but still fire-breathing warhorse, if not legend, of the criminal bar. Ever since circumstances had brought us into an unlikely partnership, the practice had grown faster than either of us could have hoped.

I walked through the open door into his office with my hands turned up. "Sorry, Mr. Devlin. I forgot the coffee. It's been an interesting morn—"

I could see a big hand shoot up for silence from behind the swivel desk chair. He spun around, and once again I was struck, as is every member of every jury he's ever faced, by the awesome power of the man's presence.

He said a few closing words into the phone and hung up slowly.

"I think you're in for an interesting day, Michael. That was Pat Boyle. D. A.'s office up in Winchester County." I sank into the chair in front of his desk to get a grip for what I knew I did not want to hear.

"Looks like an indictment."

"Who, for what?"

He looked at me with those laser eyes for a second. I had a feeling he was getting a sense of whether or not to soften the news. Either version was a killer on an empty stomach.

"You were apparently out at the Salaam estate this morning. That's why Pat called. He knew you were close with the family. The birth canal of the horse was slashed to pieces on the inside. The horse bled to death. It was the most vicious attack on an animal Pat had ever come across."

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My emotions were going into overload. I wondered if Teymour knew and whether or not he could take it. Mr. Devlin let me filter that before he dropped the other shoe.

"The indictment is against a young stable worker, Bobby Williams. They found him in the stall with a razor in his hand."

I could visualize the broken bolt on the inside of the stall door that had locked Bobby inside alone with the horse. Now I really wondered if Teymour was holding up.

Mr. Devlin's phone buzzed. He punched one of the line buttons and listened before handing the phone across the desk to me. I could barely detect Teymour's voice on the line.

"Mike . . ."

"I heard, Teymour. Are you all right?"

There was first silence that answered the question.

"Mike, I need you. They tell me Bobby . . . He couldn't do it, Mike. He's like my son. He couldn't hurt a horse. I know it, Mike."

"I know, Teymour. Let me handle that part of it. Where's Bobby now?"

I could sense a piece of the burden shifting from Teymour's shoulders to mine.

"He's at the North Shore Hospital. He's conscious, but still very groggy. They want to keep him overnight. Mike, they've got guards on the door."

"I know. It's all right, Teymour. I'll give him a little space to recover before I talk to him."

I was catching hand-signals from Mr. D. across the desk that meant he wanted to see Teymour in our office as soon as he could come in. I let Teymour know that it was important not to let days or even hours slip away. He agreed.

I looked back to see storm clouds brewing over the lines of that Mount Rushmore profile. I'd learned to let the clouds gather in silence until they broke. When he looked up, I was there.

"Tell me everything you saw out there, Michael."

I brought back every scrap of recollection of the morning's tragedy that I could rely on. His mood only seemed to deepen with the details.

When Teymour arrived, I took him into Mr. Devlin's office. Teymour was the color of alabaster and swimming between currents of grief and rage. I knew they were real, but I could sense that Mr. D. was scanning every nuance of body language to get a true reading on our new client. When Mr. Devlin spoke, it was with gentleness.

"Mr. Salaam, part of me wants to leave you to try to regain your peace. Another part tells me that's a luxury that's out of the question right now. Can we have a few words?"

Teymour stiffened his frame in the chair. The answer was, "Yes,"

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whether he was up to it or not.

"We'll cut this as short as we can. The D.A.'s going to want the same information, so it's well to get your mind together. This Bobby, how did you meet him?"

Salaam seemed slightly relieved to talk of other days.

"He stole my saddle."

Mr. D.'s eyebrows went up. I knew the story, but I could understand my partner's confusion. "This boy who worked for you?"

"This boy to whom I would trust my life. It was at an Arabian horse show in Boston. The saddle was covered with sculpted silver. It was an heirloom, beyond price. Bobby was caught with the saddle leaving the show grounds. He was, of course, convicted. He was fourteen at the time. Instead of an institution, I asked that he come to work for me. That was two years ago."

"Why would you want him to work for you?"

Teymour's eyes were locked with Mr. Devlin's and I could see more passing between them than what was said.

"When he took the saddle, it was on the back of my finest Arabian stallion. He has the fire of the Creator bottled up in him. No one can approach that horse but myself and my horse master, Mohammed. I knew this boy must have the gift. I couldn't let it be wasted."

"And does he have the gift?"

"Even Mohammed trusts him with every horse in the stable."

"And who is Mohammed?"

"The grandfather of Mohammed was Master of the Horse to my grandfather. His father to my father. And now Mohammed to me."

Teymour had apparently passed the test. I could see Mr. Devlin loosen a bit as he turned his chair sideways and leaned back. Experience told me that he now trusted the source and was ready to sift the facts. "Tell me about this horse, Avitar."

"She's a three-year-old thoroughbred filly. She's been racing quite successfully in northern Europe. I bought her from a racing stable in Belgium. She just arrived at my stable last night."

"How did you find her in the first place?"

"I didn't. Mohammed does all my buying. He's the only one I'd trust. He travels to Europe twice a year."

"Anywhere else?"

"South America. Near East. Morocco. Anywhere there are fine horses."

"And you trust him."

Teymour could never speak less than his full feelings, and his feelings always ran to his soul. He raised his hands.

"With my life."

The flow of questions ended with a pause for thought. Finally, Mr. Devlin stood and offered his hand across the desk.

"Mr. Salaam, Michael or I may want to see that stall as soon as

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possible. You might spread the word to the police that we represent Bobby."

Teymour stood and took his hand. "Mr. Devlin, we're in your hands. Money is no . . ."

Mr. Devlin raised his hands. "It's not a concern of ours, either, Mr. Salaam. Try to stay close to home. We may need you."

I was dispatched at full speed back to the stall before inexperienced police feet and hands could muck over the evidence too thoroughly. Mr. D. had laid out the instructions so that I could work fast. There was no one else there when I slipped under the yellow crime-scene tape that cordoned off the stall. I took a pen-knife to the frayed screw-holes in the wood on the inside of the stall door where the heavy metal eye that was part of the bolt mechanism had been pried off by Mohammed from the outside to get to the horse and Bobby. I noticed that the screws were heavy three-inchers, but as I cut into the wood that had held them, only an inch or so of the grooving in the wood had been stripped.

I checked for brushed patterns in the wood shavings on the floor of the stall that might indicate that someone had moved the horse or the boy, but it looked as if half the north shore of Boston had played soccer in the stall since the incident. So much for crime-scene preservation.

It was midafternoon when I called the hospital. Our client was still experiencing severe headaches and running a fever. They were keeping him for at least another day, so I put off the interview until the following morning.

That was the plan until I called Mr. Devlin and passed on what I had found out about the stall door. I could tell he was pacing when he gave the emphatic order to see Bobby Williams in the next five minutes, or sooner if I could learn to fly.

I drove to the North Shore Hospital as fast as traffic would allow, ignoring yellow lights and showing minimum courtesy to the red ones. Teymour had told me that he was in Room 408. I took the stairs in groups and followed the signs down a labeled corridor. The ants began crawling in my stomach when I saw no police uniform in sight outside the door. No one was there to stop me from opening the door of Room 408. The empty and made-up bed sent me to the nurses' station on a dead run. I got the attention of the white uniform behind the desk.

"Room four-oh-eight, Bobby Williams, young black fellow. Where is he?"

She was clearly not moving at my pace.

"I'm sorry, sir. Are you family?"

"I'm his attorney. Was he discharged? Did the police take him?"

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"No, sir. I'm afraid Mr. Williams is dead."

That was twice that day the breath went out of me.

"How did he die? Was he under police guard at the time?"

"Oh, yes. They were here until he was taken to the morgue. His fever increased, and he simply passed away about an hour ago."

I was foreseeing Mr. Devlin's questions.

"Could I see a copy of his medical report?"

I could see the door close. "I'm sorry, sir. That's private. I couldn't . . . "

"Then could you stand right there while I get someone on your phone?"

She seemed adequately frozen to the spot to let me reach over the counter for the phone and dial the number of the D. A.'s office. I got Pat Boyle on the line. We had met on previous cases, but more importantly, he knew I was the partner of Mr. Devlin.

"Pat, this is Mike Hunter. I'm at the North Shore Hospital. Bobby Williams is dead. Mr. Devlin's going to want a copy of the medical records as soon as possible. You can get them for evidence. How about giving the word to the nurse here?"

I could sense hesitation.

"Listen, Pat. You can't try a dead man. Work with me here. I think I can hand you a live one. The right one. I need those records. Time's a-wastin'."

Logic is logic, especially when there's nothing to lose. Pat told the nurse that Williams's records were impounded as evidence, and as the defense attorney I had the right to see them. The fine legal point of whether or not a defense attorney can have a dead client escaped the nurse and apparently didn't bother Pat. I had a copy of the records on the seat beside me on the way back to the office.

The scowl deepened as Mr. Devlin pulled out of the medical records the fact that Bobby Williams ran increasing fever and flu symptoms before he unexpectedly died. He grabbed the phone and dialed a number out of the Rolodex on his desk. He put it on speakerphone.

"Let me speak to the coroner. This is Lex Devlin."

I'd come to realize that if there was a public official, state or federal, connected with criminal justice who did not know Lex "from the old days," it was probably a new appointment.

"Anthony, I assume you're through with the Williams autopsy by now."

The voice of an older man doing two things at once came on. He drawled, "On it right now, Lex."

"What does it look like?"

"Beats me. Severe flu pattern, but shouldn't have killed him. Young boy like that. It wasn't the blow to the head either. Only minor cerebral hemorrhaging. No serious residual brain damage

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from the concussion. If it's a virus that did it, it's one that hasn't passed through this lab before."

Lex was on his feet doing laps between the wall and the chair. He came back to lean into the speakerphone.

"Anthony, this is crazy, but try it anyway. The kid was swimming in a pool of blood from a horse that had just been brought into the country. Check his blood for a high concentration of Venezuelan Equine Encephalomyelitis. It's called VEE."

"Say what?"

Mr. D. spelled it. "It's not really possible, Anthony. But it's one of the very few horse diseases that humans can catch. It's a killer. If the horse had come from South America, I'd bet on it. But the horse came from Belgium. There is no VEE in northern Europe. They wouldn't have even checked for it at Animal Import."

"How'd you come up with that one, Lex?"

"In my shadier days as a prosecutor, I convicted a couple of Brazilians who were smuggling horses in from South America. I came closer than I wanted to VEE."

"I'm down to the impossible now anyway, Lex. I'll let you know."

Lex disconnected and immediately dialed the number I gave him for Teymour. He was deeply depressed about the death of his protégé.

"Mr. Salaam, I'm very sorry about Bobby Williams's death. He's still the only suspect. I don't think he did it. Would you like to help me clear him?"

There was no hesitation. "Yes."

"Then I need your help. Where's the horse now?"

"He's still here. There's a truck coming from the equine center to take him for an autopsy."

"Mr. Salaam, before they take him and slow things down, can you get a vet out there to check the horse for VEE?"

"I could, but that's not possible. He was flown directly from Belgium. There's—"

"I know. Can you just do it to humor an old lawyer? Another thing. Are you absolutely sure the horse that arrived was the one you bought in Belgium?"

"No doubt whatsoever. I always check the racing number tattooed on the inside lip of the horse against the original papers. I did that last night when she came in."

"Mr. Salaam, I'm sending a man out there this afternoon. Don't let them take the horse until my man makes some tests." Teymour agreed.

"One last request. I'd like you and Mohammed to meet us in the office of Patrick Boyle, the assistant district attorney. Can you be there tomorrow morning at nine?"

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"Of course, but why Mohammed? What are you thinking?"

Mr. Devlin lowered his voice as if to soften, and yet stress, what he was saying. "I'm thinking the less said to Mohammed, the better."

There was a silence on the other end of the speakerphone that left me again heartsick for Teymour. I barely heard the response above the silence.

"I see."

The clouds were beginning to spit when we arrived at the district attorney's office the next morning. Mr. Devlin was silent in his own thoughts while we waited in Pat Boyle's office for Teymour and Mohammed. When they arrived, Pat addressed Mohammed first.

"I believe you were the first to reach the stable yesterday morning. Is that right?"

Mohammed nodded in silence.

"You saw the blood, the horse down, Bobby Williams on the floor."

Another nod.

"The stall door was bolted shut from the inside."

"That's correct."

Mohammed's rigid tone infused yet more tension into the gathering.

"So you took a pitchfork and pried the stall door open from the outside?"

"Yes."

Pat's pause left a silence that rang with the deep, quiet voice of Mr. Devlin.

"I don't think so."

The air became thick. Mr. Devlin had every eye.

"At least you and I know it didn't happen that way, don't we, Mohammed?"

Mohammed stood, but he seemed not to know how to respond. Mr. Devlin stood as well, to face him.

"That bolt on the inside of the stall was meant to keep two thousand pounds of horse from kicking open the door. And you pried it open with a pitchfork from the outside. I don't think so."

Mohammed's rigid body gave no indication of what he might do. His eyes narrowed to slits. "Are you saying that I lied?"

The question was an accusation of Mr. Devlin. They both stood their ground.

"Michael checked the holes left by the three-inch screws in the bolt. The wood had been stripped of its grooves for only about an inch. Shall I tell you what really happened?"

Mohammed answered with a glare that made me wonder what sort of man we were dealing with. Mr. Devlin's voice remained calm, but seemed to grow stronger.

"You unscrewed the bolts to the point where you could force the

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stall door open, probably with your shoulder, from the inside. That made it look as if Bobby Williams had locked himself in the stall to do what he wanted with the horse. But Bobby was unconscious, wasn't he? My guess is, he came into the stall and found you doing something to the horse he probably couldn't believe. You hit him on the head with something that would look like a kick from the horse. You probably thought you'd killed him. How am I doing?"

Mohammed's face was ashen. His body was so rigid it began to quiver in spasms. He turned from Mr. Devlin to Pat Boyle.

"You listen to these lies and say nothing? Are you arresting me for these fantasies of an old man?"

Pat remained seated behind his desk.

"You're not under arrest. If you were, I'd have given you Miranda warnings. This is just a discussion."

The quivering stopped. Mohammed was no less rigid, but he seemed to gain control. He began to move to the door. Teymour picked up the raincoat he had thrown over the back of a chair, moved quickly beside him, and put an arm around his shoulder.

"Mohammed, your family and mine have had bonds of trust for generations. We need to talk and reach the truth here."

Mohammed was silent, but he stopped where he was. Teymour remained with his arm around the man with whom he had been raised from birth. They both turned to face the voice of Mr. Devlin.

"A question, Mohammed. How could a horse that badly injured have kicked high enough to reach the back of Bobby Williams's head?"

Mohammed was frozen in silence. Mr. Devlin moved closer.

"So whatever happened to that horse was at your hand, Mohammed. You were the only other person in the stall. You were also the only person who saw Avitar before the shipment from Belgium. Would you know if the horse that arrived yesterday was not Avitar, or are you becoming an old man, too?"

Mohammed's eyes were on fire. It seemed that only the gentle persuasion of Teymour's embrace was preventing him from bursting from the room.

"No, you knew it, Mohammed. That wasn't Avitar."

Teymour broke in. "Mr. Devlin, I checked the racing tattoo on the lip of the horse. It was Avitar."

"Do you remember the man I sent to your stable yesterday, Mr. Salaam? He's an expert on tattooing ink. He works with racetracks to prevent fraud. The tattoo on that horse that died in your stall had been altered like changing the brand on cattle. An expert can tell if a different ink from the original was used. We know the identification was altered. I was sure of it anyway when I got a confirmation from the coroner that Bobby Williams died of a horse disease called Venezuelan Equine Encephalomyelitis. Your vet

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found the horse was full of the virus. That couldn't have happened with Avitar. VEE doesn't exist in Europe. The horse had to come from South or Central America."

Teymour looked into the frozen eyes of Mohammed.

"Why?"

"Smuggling. It's been done before." Mr. Devlin's eyes were locked with Mohammed's as he spoke. "Was it drugs, diamonds, what, Mohammed? Whatever it was, it was secreted inside the birth canal of the filly. It can be done. It'll stay there until it's removed by hand. But you couldn't find it, could you, Mohammed? Maybe a double-cross by your friends on the other side of the ocean. That's why you went inside with a razor blade to see if it had moved. You must have been desperate. I'm sure you're accountable for whatever it was to the people on this end."

Teymour's arm on Mohammed's shoulder moved him until they were eye-to-eye. I could see dread in Teymour's expression. He held Mohammed closely.

"On our families' trust, Mohammed, is it true?"

The anger drained from Mohammed's eyes as they seemed to be cast down in remorse. I could barely hear the words he spoke into Teymour's ear.

"Forgive me."

The words flowed through Teymour's body like fire. His arm around Mohammed's shoulder stiffened. The sleeve of the raincoat Teymour had over his arm fell away. I could see the point of a blade Teymour had been holding against Mohammed's neck. With one small convulsion of Teymour's arm the blade pierced the skin, loosing a tiny trickle of blood. It was the barest penetration, but it seemed to sap the tension from Teymour's body. His grip loosened and fell. Mohammed walked slowly through the door.

Teymour looked at Pat Boyle. "Are you going to arrest him? He admitted it."

Pat sat motionless, as did we all.

"I can't. The confession, such as it was, was under coercion in my office. It wouldn't be admissible in court. Don't worry, Mr. Salaam. We know the truth now. We'll get the evidence."

Teymour picked up his coat where it had fallen. He seemed ten years older, but the fury was gone. He looked at Mr. Devlin, and then at me, with an expression that conveyed a sense of closure that I could not understand at the time. It was in his voice as well.

"It doesn't matter. He's in the hands of God now."

It was two days later when Mr. Devlin and I read in the paper that the body of Mohammed had been found. The autopsy indicated that he had died of a virus found only in horses in South and Central America. ●

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THE GOOD OWEN

by Cindy Gorczyca

EQMM debuts a new fiction writer from Parma, Ohio this month. We know little about Cindy Gorczyca beyond the fact that her nonfiction work has appeared in publications such as the *American Literary Review* and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Sometimes, however, an author's work says more about her than any bio. We can tell from this tale, for instance, that Ms. Gorczyca is a keen observer of human nature.

He was happiest on collection day. Walking briskly toward his neighbor's driveway, his feet seemed to barely touch ground. When he rang the bell, wild mice raced desperately in his chest.

Mrs. Milroy's house was first. Owen viewed this as a simple warmup exercise before moving on to more challenging customers. She invited him in, then left him on her mallard welcome mat while she disappeared deep into the back rooms of the house. Searching for her purse, she made soft, rustling noises. And she continued talking, confiding intimate details about her husband, her daughters, her gall bladder, never realizing her voice alerted Owen to her exact location. It was so easy, he could have found it boring. But Mrs. Milroy had too many things for him to consider: a matchbook, a bookmark, a single crocheted coaster. All would be missed, eventually, but hardly assumed stolen.

"I have exact change for you, Owen," Mrs. Milroy said, emerging from the bedroom. Most of his customers did, with hot chocolate on brisk days, lemonade in the summer. They welcomed him like a son, shook his hand, patted him on the shoulder. Smiling politely, he felt like slapping them. "And here's an extra dollar for the good service. Lord knows how hard it is to find a reliable paperboy."

Owen noted that she waved the bill in front of his nose like a chew toy. "Thank you, Mrs. Milroy," he said pleasantly.

Back on her driveway, Owen folded the bills over and slipped

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them into a deep recess of his oversized Padua High School jacket. Though small for his age, he had ordered a large intentionally and sewn extra felt pockets inside with short, erratic stitches. He had seen a similar coat in an old movie; the thief hid an entire silver service in his overcoat lining. Owen's jacket left little room for silver services, but he was pleased just the same. Mrs. Milroy's ashtray, the one with the gold letters reading "Statler Hotel; Cleveland, Ohio" lay snug against his chest, the bulge undetected under the embroidered white "P."

"Hello, there! Owen Chandler!" It was pear-shaped Mrs. Leary from across the street. Petey, her new Chihuahua, was making staccato yips and jumping toward Owen while she yanked him back and forth by his rhinestone choker chain. Owen hated the dog. His secret wish was to see Petey flattened mercilessly by the oversized tire of a garbage truck.

"Oh, Owen, I'm glad I caught you! We were just going for a walk, you see, and I left my wallet inside." Petey was barking, growling and rearing up on his hind legs. Each time he landed, he snapped at Owen, at the leash, at Mrs. Leary's polyester cuffs.

Owen frowned. "I can come back."

"You will do nothing of the sort," she stated. "I'll just be a moment, now. Oh, and take Petey here, will you?"

Reluctantly Owen took the leash and held it high over his head while Petey ran in circles around him, barking and yelping furiously. Owen had to literally drag him up the driveway, which he found quite delightful. The dog's toenails clicked like tiny castanets against the rough cement, leaving needlelike, chalky trails.

The instant they reached Mrs. Leary's side door, Petey went into a frenzy, yelping and wailing at something on the edge of the neighbor's grass. At first Owen didn't understand. Then he spotted an orange fluorescent golf ball nestled in the lawn. "What's the matter, Petey? Do you want your ball?" he said in his best sincere voice.

The dog took turns straining at the leash and bouncing on all fours.

"Okay, then. Go get it."

He let the leash slacken and Petey scampered toward the grass.

Owen waited precisely until the dog opened wide and dipped his head to attack the ball, then gleefully gave the leash a ruthless tug that jerked the dog off its feet. Petey snarled, hissed, ran in circles. Then he went straight for Owen's ankles.

"Petey! Stop that!" Mrs. Leary said, returning. The dog was growling so fiercly, spittle dotted the top of Owen's shoes. Quickly Mrs. Leary swept Petey into her arms and clamped one hand firmly around the dog's muzzle. "You'd better take this," she said,

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pointing with her chin. The money was sprouting from her other hand, which supported the dog's rump.

Owen carefully surveyed the situation. One false move and he was sure to lose a finger. He popped his knuckles and wriggled his fingers like a safecracker. Then he gingerly pulled the dollar bills from Mrs. Leary's fingers while Petey's eyes followed like tiny brown searchlights. Owen could actually feel the dog's gaze on his hands as he carefully folded the money and stuffed it in his jacket.

"I'm sorry to put you to all this trouble, Owen," Mrs. Leary said. "I don't know why he's so mean to you. Usually, he's nothing but a little sweetie face. Isn't that right, Petey?" She planted a wet kiss on the dog's forehead and Owen's stomach turned. Still, he smiled innocently. "No trouble, ma'am. No trouble at all."

His paper route encompassed five streets of postwar Parma bungalows that ran east of Broadview Road and south of Snow. Uniformly white, the tiny homes were distinguished only by the color of their shutters or a sporadic, struggling sapling on the tree lawn. Owen liked this bland landscape. He could stand on the corner of each street and see every house on the entire block. Not a tree or shrub obstructed his view. From this keen vantage point, he felt omnipotent.

He chose the houses to collect from purely at random: all on Meadowlawn, every other on Parkleigh, the south side of Clearview. And since his customers never knew when to expect him, he usually caught them at odd, inconvenient moments. Owen was especially pleased to find Mildred Spencer scrubbing her bathroom floor. Rubber-gloved and smelling of Pine Sol, she was distracted just enough to allow him to slip a past-due gas bill into his jacket pocket undetected.

How easy this had become! At first the trick had been to get inside just one house, but even that had become routine. He sensed, even before ringing the bell, which one was his for the taking. It was a gift, he supposed. A sixth sense. And if he wasn't invited to step inside, he wormed his way in to use the bathroom, or say hello to grandmother in the La-Z-Boy, or see the new berber carpeting. A little small talk, a little sleight of hand. It was that simple.

He had been gone nearly two hours and collected from half his customers when his jacket was full and his belly empty. Arriving home, he quickly made himself an egg-salad sandwich and slipped into his room. Carefully he pulled his mother's May Company hatbox from under his bed and removed the lid. As he ate, he emptied his jacket pockets onto it. A package of shoelaces, a thimble, two fountain pens, a swizzle stick from the Roxy Bar and Grill, Mrs. Milroy's ashtray, the gas bill, and Petey's orange ball lay on the hatbox lid like lost treasure. Meticulously he listed them in the

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small spiral notebook he kept for this singular purpose. He noted the date and where he got each item. Then, one by one, he added them to the box.

"A smile is everything," Owen's father told him. "It opens doors for you; it earns trust. And once people trust you . . . Well, you know what I always say."

Owen was too busy combining the sections for the *Plain Dealer* Sunday edition to listen to his father, so he nodded politely instead. After all, politeness was his strong point. Everybody said so. The sections were stacked individually in the center of the living room and both Chandlers worked their way around like children playing musical chairs. But while Lloyd Chandler was eager to help, he was all thumbs. He skipped sections, he folded them upside down. Owen was left to check every paper his father put together. Still, he never admonished him. Witnessing his father's incompetence was sufficient. It filled dark chasms in Owen's life; it answered questions. His mother had left the year before because of this man. What other reason could she possibly have had?

"A smile is like money in the bank, son," he continued. "Yes, sir. Like a hundred-dollar bill. And manners. A 'thank you'; a 'you're welcome.' They go a long way."

"Yes, sir," Owen said. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome," said Owen's father.

After loading the papers into the station wagon, Lloyd drove up and down the streets of Owen's route while his son zigzagged door to door. Owen felt perverse pleasure watching his father follow slowly behind like a chauffeur. Sometimes he skipped a house intentionally, just to see him stop the car and slowly ease it backward. Only a week before, his father dutifully drove in reverse all the way to the previous block. ("Now, Owen," he said. "You make me do the darndest things.") This morning, however, Owen didn't feel like skipping houses. Fall was in the air; it held a cool dampness that he found refreshing. Dew drops on the lawns glistened like tiny diamonds. At this time of early morning, the entire neighborhood looked freshly washed and serene. The only thing disrupting this peaceful air was Petey's muffled yips and yelps from deep inside the Leary house. High and short, they carried out onto the street where Owen stood. The barking was strangely rhythmic. Owen thought it sounded, oddly, like marching orders.

He knew the dog was waiting for him. He only had to slide his shoe onto the stone porch step to hear Petey howl and scratch and throw himself against the door. Then he waved the ball like a magic wand in front of the window and listened to the sweet sound of Petey's frenzied hysteria grow until Mrs. Leary appeared, curlers in her haywire hair, apologizing profusely.

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"I'm so sorry," she told him as the dog tried to dive through the screen. "I just don't know what to do about his barking. Even the neighbors are starting to complain."

"Well," said Owen delicately. "He does bark an awful lot."

"Only lately," she said quickly. "I keep hoping it's just a phase. Like worms."

"In the meantime, I'll just leave the paper on the step—if that's all right with you, of course."

"Absolutely. And I apologize again, Owen. I don't know what his problem is, but I'm certainly going to find out." She spoke pointedly above the dog's yapping. "I'm taking him to the vet today. He ought to be able to suggest something."

Owen strutted back to the station wagon picturing Petey slowly expiring under the veterinarian's steely foot-long hypodermic needle.

The man from the *Plain Dealer* telephoned the following evening. "Congratulations, son," he said. "You've been selected to be Carrier of the Week." Mr. Benedetto, the man who lived in the yellow house with the truck-tire planter on his tree lawn, had submitted Owen's name, along with letters of recommendation from a dozen others in the neighborhood. The announcement was to be printed at the beginning of the week, quoting Mr. Benedetto: "Owen Chandler is courteous, forthright, and an extremely hard worker. Our papers are delivered on a timely basis, rain or shine. It is a pleasure doing business with such a fine, outstanding young man. I am certain Owen will grow up to do many great things."

On Monday morning, the neighbors, clad in bathrobes and slippers, assembled on their doorsteps like star-struck fans. They offered him coffee, Pop-Tarts, even a ride to school. Mrs. Milroy kissed him on the bridge of his nose. "Our neighborhood celebrity! Congratulations!"

The Benedettos insisted he stay for pancakes and sausage. Owen sat between them in the breakfast nook, expecting more well-wishing and handshakes, but an eerie silence pervaded the room. Mrs. Benedetto seemed distracted and clumsy. Twice her thick sleeves knocked her fork to the floor, twice Mr. Benedetto returned it patiently to the table. He looked at her as if this simple gesture had proven some ultimate, all-encompassing point. Finally she excused herself and left the kitchen.

Mr. Benedetto held his palm against his mouth to muffle his voice. "My wife's been misplacing things lately. Small things. Cheap things. She claims it's a thief."

Owen felt the familiar scratching of mice in his chest.

"Can you imagine? A thief breaks into our house and what does he take? The TV? The VCR? Nope. He steals a Magic Marker and

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a refrigerator magnet. Ha!"

"Hmm," said Owen thoughtfully.

"Actually, that Mrs. Milroy down the street put the idea in her head. She claims the thief's been to her house, too." He leaned very close to Owen. Crumbs clung to his moustache. Softly, confidentially, he said, "Mrs. Milroy's missing some ashtray she ripped off from the old Statler Hotel."

Owen took a deep breath to calm himself. "Well," he said. "Mrs. Milroy is getting up in age."

"She's getting old and forgetful, that's what she is. And frankly, so's my wife. But, hey. That's life, right?"

"Absolutely," said Owen.

"A thief that steals a bunch of crap. Sheesh!"

After a few moments, Mrs. Benedetto returned. She was freshly dressed. Her hair was perfect. "My husband is accusing me of misplacing things," she said as she began clearing the dishes. "Which is simply not the case." She looked directly at her husband. "So maybe, Albert, you can tell me where your pinochle deck is?"

"My pinochle deck?"

"You left it on the card table last night."

He frowned. "So?"

"So I was about to clean up in there and noticed it was gone." Mr. Benedetto looked at Owen. Then he squeezed out of the breakfast nook and sauntered into the living room. "Well, it's got to be here somewhere," Owen heard him say. There was the sound of drawers opening and closing and magazines dropping to the floor. Mr. Benedetto said. "I'll be damned."

That night, with the window open less than an inch, Petey's bark drifted into Owen's bedroom on the cool breeze. Where once it had annoyed him, he now took the sharp yips for granted. They were like background music in the movie about the thief with the overcoat.

They set the mood for homework, for sleep, for examining the secrets he kept in the May Company hatbox under his bed.

Taking the dog's ball made all the difference. Owen liked the size of it, the way it fit in his loosely cupped hand. He liked the way his thumb felt when he ran it across its indentations. And he liked the fact that his having it drove Petey crazy.

So what if a few neighborhood ladies had noticed things missing? He was the last one they'd suspect. They liked him; they trusted him. He was Carrier of the Week, after all. Still, he felt uneasy. He tossed the ball up and down while he paced his room and his feet fell in step with the dog's steady bark. He would lay low for a while, he decided; just until the veil of suspicion lifted. He would stop filling the May Company box until he was sure it was safe.

At first this new routine was fairly easy. Nothing changed; he

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was still the excellent paperboy everyone said he was. But Mr. Benedetto noticed his reluctance to linger and chat.

"If I didn't know better," he said, "I'd say fame has gone right to your head."

Owen nodded solemnly, carefully keeping his eyes off the cluttered tables and window seat.

"I'm joking, Owen. It's just a joke. Come on. Sit. Have a soda."

"No, thank you," he said impatiently.

"What's the matter?" asked Mrs. Benedetto. "Feeling ill?"

"No, ma'am."

There was an uneasy silence. He knew they were waiting for him to elaborate, but there was no reason for small talk now, no purpose in diverting their attention. So he simply collected their money and started for the door.

"Everything all right at home?" Mr. Benedetto called after him.

Owen stared at him blankly.

"I mean, with your father alone and all."

He shrugged. "My father's alone. So what?"

Only when he was at the bottom of the porch steps did he realize how odd he felt. There was a dull heaviness in the pit of his stomach, as if he'd swallowed something indigestible.

The heaviness grew as he found himself drawn to the stray coins and stamps on Mildred Spencer's drop-leaf table. He knew he could palm them effortlessly, but instead, to be safe, he pushed his balled-up fists deep into his jacket pockets.

"Tell me, Owen," she said as she rummaged through her pocketbook. "Are you missing anything?"

"I beg your pardon?"

She chuckled. "Well, it seems there's a bona fide junk thief running loose. Either that, or the entire neighborhood's losing its mind. Surely you've heard about it."

"I think so," he said unconvincingly. He waited for the mice to scamper, but felt nothing.

"The neighborhood's missing all sorts of things. Votive candles, hearing-aid batteries, the handles from outside faucets." Her expression changed. "And get this," she said incredulously. "Betty Leary, the lady with the pink shutters and that silly dog? She's scared to death it's Alzheimer's. She hasn't walked the poor thing in a week. She just stands in her dining-room window and watches him shoot the shrubbery."

"Hmmn," he said.

Sure enough, on his way home he spotted Petey with his leg aloft, leaning into the pachysandra while Mrs. Leary stood cautiously at the window. The dog raised his head and let out a guttural growl that made the hairs on the back of Owen's neck turn to tiny prickly spiders. He realized that not long before he would

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have relished this confrontation. But things were different now. How, he wasn't sure. But as he crossed the street, he was struck by the sameness of the tiny homes, separated only by the slim width of their driveways. The street was barren and lifeless. And so were the people that crossed behind their drapes in the evening lamplight. They held nothing for him now; nothing for the May Company hatbox. Their purpose had dried up and blown away like the autumn leaves under his feet.

To no one's surprise, Mrs. Leary's failure to walk Petey made him even more high-strung. Owen, in his bedroom, heard the dog yelp at all hours of the day and into the evening. He kept the window shut, but the barking continued, as constant and sure as his own heartbeat. That night he woke to the unmistakable yapping. And once awake, he found himself staring at the window until the first hint of dawn seeped through the blinds.

"Owen," his father said at the breakfast table the following morning. "Chin up, boy. Sit up straight and face the day with a spring in your step."

Owen said nothing. He was unable to even politely nod. It was after seven A.M. and he was still in his pajamas. As far as he was concerned, the papers could wait.

Lloyd looked at him, his eyebrows knitted in bewilderment. "Don't you feel well, Owen?"

Owen shook his head.

"Cold? Flu?"

Again he shook his head.

"An apple a day, son. An apple a day . . ."

Raindrops spattered his bedroom window as he dressed. His shirt buttons felt thick between his fingers; his jacket seemed like it had been loaded with lead weights. He pushed his feet into his shoes with difficulty and took deep breaths. He ran his thumb over the orange fluorescent ball in his pocket. But even this failed to uplift him.

Exhausted and bleary-eyed, he carelessly packed his papers in their canvas bags, and once on the street, he was satisfied just to fling them onto each porch with a wayward, erratic pitch. Moments later he hit Mrs. Milroy square in her full chest as she opened the door to greet him.

"Goodness, Owen!" she cried. "That was rather careless of you!"

Owen turned his palms out apologetically. But before he could stop himself, he said, "Hey, you got your damn paper, didn't you?"

She was shocked. "Well, I never!"

"Yeah, well, maybe that's your problem," he smirked as he took a shortcut across her front lawn.

The rain flattened his hair against his head and soaked through

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his jacket, chiding his skin. Water squirted out of the sides of his shoes with every step. It was all he could do to keep from abandoning the canvas bags strapped across his chest like bandoleers. Finally he dropped Mildred Spencer's newspaper on the walkway in front of her porch steps and simply watched the raindrops attack it, then quickly merge, rotting the paper before his eyes. By this time, he was acutely aware of Petey barking furiously across the street, but he ignored him. In fact, he skipped the Leary house entirely. Oddly, as he approached the next driveway he began to feel a little better. So he skipped that house, too. A sudden surge of enthusiasm quickened his steps. He left papers fully exposed on tree lawns, on sidewalks, in the middle of driveways. He placed a paper on the hood of a parked car and another in a child's swing. By the time he finished, the street was dotted with newspapers rippling violently in the brisk wind. He walked home dreaming gleefully of them scattering like giant snowflakes down the block.

Mr. Benedetto was the first to call. Owen and his father had just sat down to dinner and the telephone startled them both.

"I hate to complain, Lloyd," he told Owen's father, "but my paper was blown all over the yard this morning. I had to pull half the darn thing out of the shrubbery."

Owen's father mumbled a limp apology and quickly hung up the phone. But as soon as the receiver rested in its cradle, the telephone rang again.

"This is Alice Milroy. I think you should know that something is very wrong with Owen," she said.

The irate calls continued until Owen's father, tired and pale from apologies, had had enough. He removed the phone from the hook, placed it facedown on the counter, and escaped into the living room. Sitting heavily on the couch, he switched on the television and turned the channels over and over.

For the first time, Owen realized how much his father's entire demeanor unnerved him. He knew he could probably slap him silly and still receive no retribution. The man was pathetic.

The thought of these things so sickened him that he hurried into his bedroom and closed the door solidly behind him. For a moment, he didn't know what to do. Then he slipped into bed and pulled the covers tightly over his head. He heard only the sound of his shallow breathing against the cool sheets and the soft drone of the television seeping in under his door. He listened to the gentle lub-dub of his heartbeats until suddenly he was aware of another presence in the room. Something, somehow, had stolen its way in; a thief, perhaps, there to steal his very breath. He tensed every muscle in his body. Amid the darkness of the blankets wrapped tight as straitjackets, he heard Petey's high-pitched, persistant bark so clearly he could have been standing at the foot of his bed.

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And at that precise moment, Owen realized the dog was not merely barking; he was mocking him.

Slowly he untangled himself and moved to the window. He slipped an index finger between the blinds and peered out across the street. He could see the lamplight behind Mrs. Leary's living-room drapes and a fuzzy grey shadow moving back and forth. The rest of the house was still.

He slid the May Company hatbox from under the bed and removed the lid. The secret things inside winked in the dim light of the bed lamp nearby. He examined them, one by one, like a father admiring his children. Then he opened the spiral notebook to determine where he got each item. He knew returning them to their rightful owners would be even more dangerous than taking them in the first place. This, in itself, was thrill enough.

He examined Petey's orange ball. Sitting benignly in his palm, it seemed smaller, somehow, and dull in the bed-lamp shadows. The dimples were well worn into an uneven smoothness. He tossed it in the air several times, catching it solidly in his hand. But on its final descent, it missed his palm, landing squarely in the May Company box. The impact shattered Mrs. Milroy's Statler Hotel ashtray into four evenly defined pieces.

Out on his driveway, he ran quick hands over the front of his jacket, feeling the slight bulges in his underlying pockets. It was well past seven P.M.; the air felt brisk and clean as snow. Moving with an ease he thought he had lost permanently, he stepped off the curb and walked purposefully across the street. Pear-shaped Mrs. Leary was watching him from her dining-room window as he made his way up the drive. He waved politely and forced a brave smile. Easy now, he told himself as he slipped the ball from his pocket.

He was aware of a soft rustling noise to his left and a quick blur at the corner of his eye. But before he could react, Petey was rushing out from the shrubbery like a bullet. The dog jumped up as if on springs. Instinctively Owen pushed his hands out to protect himself and Petey landed directly between them, dangling by his neck and snapping wildly. His teeth, like tiny daggers, clicked rapidly.

Owen felt his thumbs press forcefully against the dog's windpipe; his fingers closed around his throat. He was vaguely aware of Mrs. Leary yanking on his jacket sleeves; he was even less aware of the dog's ropelike saliva running down his hands.

"Owen! Oh, Owen! Please don't!" Mrs. Leary screamed. "Owen, stop it! Stop it!"

Startled, Owen stepped back and dropped the dog. Immediately Mrs. Leary fell to the ground and cradled the lifeless animal in her arms. "Petey! Oh, Petey!" she sobbed.

Several neighbors hurried into the yard. Owen watched their angular, distorted shadows march across the house menacingly.

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He felt a heavy hand grip his shoulder and flinched. It was Mr. Benedetto, towering over him in the near-darkness. His moustache was askew. "What a little shit you've become," he said, shaking him. Then, before Owen could brace himself, he pushed him to the ground.

The next thing he knew he was in the garage, emptying the May Company hatbox into a garbage can. Then he was ripping the pages from the spiral notebook into tiny squares and dropping them like confetti inside. Darkness blanketed him; he could barely make out the dull form of the station wagon. He felt for the front bumper and sat, blinking, forcing his eyes to adjust to what little light there was. He would stay there forever, if necessary. He liked the thought of being so close to everyone, and yet invisible. But noises in the driveway made his heartbeat double.

"Owen?"

He could barely make out his father's shadow gliding slowly toward the garage. He held the hatbox to his chest to muffle his heartbeats and ducked down behind the hood. His father was at the edge of the driveway now. Another step and he would be inside.

"Owen? Please come out, Owen."

He was counting on his father's fear of the dark to keep him from entering.

"Things have been happening, Owen, that have to stop. Do you understand? Owen?"

There was a long silence. Then Owen heard the sound of his father's shoe kicking the crumbled concrete cinders under his feet.

"Owen, please." He nervously cleared his throat. "I don't know what's happening, son. No one does. But the neighbors . . . I . . ." He trailed off. "All I can say is, we want the old Owen back. The nice Owen. The good Owen." There was another pause. "Do you hear me? Son?"

In another moment he was gone.

The following morning he stole one of the stray stamps from Mildred Spencer's drop-leaf table, palming it effortlessly, just as he had predicted. Immediately the familiar mice returned to race in his chest, his feet again were lighter than air. Moving down the street, the whistling winter wind made him hesitate for an instant. He thought, for just that fleeting moment, he had heard Petey barking, though he knew this was impossible. The dog's damaged larynx prevented him from making a sound.

He moved down the snow-covered block with renewed vigor. Mrs. Milroy had hot chocolate brewing for him and, more importantly, exact change in her purse somewhere deep inside the house. He couldn't wait. ●

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FINAL JEOPARDY

by Sue Pike

The Reverend Oliver Purdy (Retired) leaned on his cane and studied the six-story condominium complex. Even through the blur of cataracts he could see several places where the white stucco bulged and cracked. The wrought-iron railings along the outside walkways and stairs needed painting, and the concrete steps were pitted and marked with rust. He sighed and drew a line through this last listing on the realtor's sheet.

Just then a woman wheeling a walker along the path from the elevator pulled up beside him. Although stooped and frail, she had a crisp, no-nonsense air about her and an intelligent gleam in her eye. She looked just the way he imagined Marian might look now.

"You the gentleman who's been looking at Helen Jordan's apartment?" She tipped her head slightly to peer up at him, reminding him of the pelicans he'd seen on his drive down the coast.

He took off his straw hat and bowed deeply.

"Lola Fenton." She took her right hand off the walker and held it out to him. "Sixth floor."

The bones felt tiny and loose under the powdery covering of skin on her hand.

"Building may not look wonderful from this angle but it's the people who count. Folks here are very nice. Sociable but not pushy, if you know what I mean." She smiled at him and began to push herself back toward the complex. "Better get a move on if you want to buy it, though. Popular spot. Lots of people looking to buy here."

He strode immediately to the real-estate office to write a check.

On the flight home he thought about what she'd said and felt a

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twinge of excitement. He couldn't remember when he'd last had a social engagement that didn't involve the church.

He packed his few belongings in the old Ford Escort and drove all the way back to Florida in three days, stopping only to eat and sleep and once at an outlet mall to buy a lightweight suit of off-white sharkskin. The salesman assured him it would be perfect for an active yet refined social life.

After the monochromatic hues of a northern winter, the hectic colors and sounds of Florida confused his cataracts and jangled his nerves. Crossing the Sunshine Skyway, his eyes smarted from the glare of sunlight on sea water and he had to pull over to calm his racing heart.

But now, just a week later, standing on his very own balcony, he reveled in the rich colors and smells. The azalea bushes surrounding the pool showed a riot of vivid blooms, and the grass was a brilliant green. It crossed his mind to wonder what Marian would think of him now. He'd like to call her, just to gloat a little, but it had been forty years since she'd walked out on him and there was no reason to think she'd changed her opinions. Even if he knew how to reach her, she would probably only laugh and call him an old fool.

On the first evening in his new condominium he ate a spartan meal of cold meat and salad and at seven-thirty was just dozing over a crossword puzzle when a horrendous noise assaulted his ears. He dropped his magnifying glass and stumbled to the balcony, searching the grounds for the source of the sound until he recognized it as a television turned to top volume and coming from the apartment directly above him.

Clutching his cane, he marched outside and up the concrete stairs to the next floor. He peered closely at each door until he was able to make out the number 604. A wreath of dried flowers and colored ribbons hung lopsidedly from the door knocker. A large bottle of brown fluid on the doorstep nearly tripped him up but he managed to step around it to rap on the door with his cane. Nothing. He waited a full minute and then leaned on the bell. A high voice invited him to enter. It was the woman from the parking lot.

"Hello there. Doing the rounds to meet your new neighbors?" She was seated, feet up in a reclining rocker, a pink and blue crocheted afghan tucked around her knees.

"I must ask you to turn down that confounded machine," he said.

"Sorry. Can't hear you with *Jeopardy* on." She touched a button on the remote and although the picture remained, a blessed silence fell.

He began to bluster. "This noise is impossible. I can't possibly concentrate with such a racket going on."

"Come in. Come in. You won't mind if I don't get up?" She was bent forward, the hump of osteoporosis outlined along her back.

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"Been meaning to tell you how pleased Helen was that you bought number five-oh-four. Absolutely thrilled with the money you paid. Told her she'd never sell it at that price, but you know Helen, always ready to gamble." She smiled broadly. "And see how well it turned out? Now she can afford the Villa Vista instead of that horrible state-run nursing home."

The Reverend was confused. "I'm here to ask you to turn down your television set."

"Can't hear you. Sorry. Deaf as a post." She fished two hearing devices from among the robes and pillows on the recliner. "Just a minute while I plug myself in." She screwed one into each ear. "There now, that's better," she grinned impishly at him. "But before we visit, how about some of my Sunshine Tea? Brewing right outside the door. Must have seen it when you arrived. Lots of tea bags and cold water, then pop it out in the sun to steep. Lovely with ice cubes."

"Thank you, no. I can't stay."

"What was it you wanted to say to me, dear?"

"I asked you to turn down the volume on your television. It's deafening."

"Well, it's true, I am deaf, but judging from your glasses, I think I can probably see better than you." She hooted at her own joke and then rummaged among the covers for a tissue to dab at her eyes.

Stung, the Reverend pulled off his thick spectacles and glowered at her. "I must insist you turn it down."

"But it's *Jeopardy!* Very stimulating for my poor old brain. Watch it with me if you'd like." She patted the arm of the sofa beside her. "Final Jeopardy will be coming up in a minute."

Overcome by frustration, he could only shake his head.

"Up to you." She paused and looked him up and down. "A little tip, dear. If I were you, I wouldn't wear that suit. Men around here dress very casual: golf shirts, cotton trousers, shorts. That sort of thing."

The Reverend Oliver Purdy turned on his heel and marched out, his cane plowing little furrows in the sea-foam carpet.

"Good night then. Won't mind if I don't show you out? Take care you don't trip on the jar of tea." Her laughter followed him out the door and along the walkway.

He was halfway down the stairs when the thunderous noise began again. Final Jeopardy, indeed.

Leaning heavily against the railing, he fished in his pocket for nitroglycerine spray and puffed it once or twice under his tongue. He decided a walk along the jetty might calm him, and set out as soon as the pain subsided.

Imagine the nerve of her commenting on his eyesight. And his clothes. But more importantly, what had she meant about the price of the condo? He'd paid what was being asked. Wasn't that

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what you were supposed to do? Was there something he didn't know about buying houses? It was possible, he supposed. After all, this was the first property he'd ever owned. He'd never even bought a piece of furniture before. Committees had always furnished the various church manses with congregational castoffs and he hadn't thought it proper to ask for more. He was still embarrassed about the time Marian had phoned the chairman of the property committee and demanded a new sofa to replace the old love seat that smelled of mildew and some former pastor's cat. She'd begun painting the walls a pale blue until the committee put a stop to it. When he tried to make her see reason she laughed at him and called him a doormat.

Coming back to the mostly darkened complex, he noticed the light from Mrs. Fenton's windows spilling across the lawn. He looked up and could just make out two back-lit figures on the balcony. They appeared to be standing close together, swaying to the sounds of Glenn Miller on the record player.

He had to jab his key at his lock several times before he was able to let himself in. Rage and the shifting film of cataracts caused him to stumble over a footstool and land hard on his bad knee. He clenched his teeth to keep from howling, but he could do nothing about the tears of frustration that ran down his cheeks. She was just like Marian, didn't give a fig for other people's sensibilities. Just did whatever she wanted and never mind the consequences.

He tried to sleep but the music went on and on. Painful memories of Marian playing Glenn Miller songs on the piano flooded over him. He'd begged her to play hymns, terrified one of his congregation might overhear. But she had laughed at him.

He finally dropped into an uneasy slumber and awoke with a headache, determined to go straight downtown to speak to the real-estate people about canceling the purchase of the condo. They would do the honorable thing. Surely.

At the realtors' office the man in an acid-green shirt and unlikely toupee leaned back in his chair and grinned when he heard Reverend Purdy's concerns.

"Well, I must say you surprised us when you agreed to that price. But it's your funeral. Nothing we can do about it now." He consulted the ceiling for a few seconds. "I suppose you could always put it back on the market, but I wouldn't recommend it." He yawned. "Mrs. Jordan had it up for a year and a half, and you'd be lucky to get anything like as much as what you paid her. The market's real slow right now."

Oliver Purdy's cane jabbed savagely at the sidewalk on the trip home. It wasn't fair. Mrs. Fenton had deliberately misled him, and now that she and her television and record player were making his life intolerable, it seemed he might never get his money back.

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And never find another place he could afford on his meager pension. Marian's voice was relentless in his ear. "Oh, Ollie, you're such a fool." He whistled, hoping to drown her out, and arrived home out of breath and exhausted.

On the dot of seven-thirty that evening, the uproar blasted its way into his consciousness. He jerked awake in his chair and knocked his cup and saucer off his knee. Clutching his chest and trying to get his breath, he could only watch as the tea seeped into the orange shag rug.

He'd noticed some residents filing into the clubhouse earlier. Perhaps there was some sort of meeting in progress at which he would be allowed to air his grievances.

He pulled on the sharkskin jacket and marched along the azalea-lined path, around the swimming pool, and into the recreation building. Sixteen people were seated at four tables playing cards.

"Evening, Reverend." The woman nearest the door looked over her hand of cards and smiled at him. She seemed nice enough.

"It's about the noise, I . . ." His voice came out louder than he intended. He cleared his throat and began again. "Mrs. Fenton plays her television and her record player much too loud."

All eyes were upon him, all card hands suspended in the air. "I spoke to her and she laughed at me. It's intolerable. I can't . . . I won't put up with it."

He waited in the silence that greeted his outburst. Finally, a bald man with a large paunch cantilevered over his belt got to his feet and approached, his hand extended.

"We haven't met yet, Reverend. My name's Bert."

Mr. Purdy gave an abrupt nod.

"Lola's a good friend of ours. She'd be over here playing bridge with us right now except she's a little tired today."

"Well, I'm not surprised. She had some man over, playing music until all hours. It kept me awake."

"Why, that's just Hector. They've been friends for years." Bert winked at him and put a beefy hand on his shoulder. Mr. Purdy tried not to flinch. "There's something you should know, Reverend. We all stick together in this place and we don't like it when folk try to bully our friends."

"Bully? I'm not bullying her. I'm the injured party here. . . ." He looked around at the others for support but their hostility was like a slap in the face.

He turned and marched from the clubhouse. These weren't his kind of people after all. Mrs. Fenton had misled him about that as well. Perhaps there weren't any people like him left in the world. But he was trapped here now. He'd have to try and make the best of it.

The next day he went to the bank and extracted the last of a

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small retirement gift from his last congregation. Then he walked to Main Street and bought three cotton shirts and two pairs of twill trousers. Shorts were out of the question. Further down the street he purchased a pair of headphones to fit a television set and an outrageously expensive box of chocolates.

Back at his condo he changed into his new clothes and climbed upstairs to Mrs. Fenton's.

"Aren't you a dear. Tried those ear things once, though. Drove me crazy." She waved them away with a chuckle.

When he tried to hand her the peace offering, she shrieked with laughter. "Heavens! Not chocolates." She could hardly catch her breath and had to wipe her eyes with one of the tissues stuffed into the pillows around her. "Oh my dear, take them away, take them away. I'm diabetic." He could hear her laughter all the way down the stairs to his own apartment.

He sank onto the sofa, sprayed nitroglycerine under his tongue, and rubbed his clenched fist in circles over his chest, trying to massage away the pain. It was too much. She would be the death of him.

Marian had been like that. Laughing at him, prodding him to ask for a raise, preferring fun over duty. She'd taken exactly what she wanted from life, with never a thought for him. Leaving him in the fourth year of their marriage had ruined his career. The better congregations wouldn't consider a pastor without a wife, and a divorced man at that. For the rest of his ministry he'd been stuck in a series of rural backwaters, preaching to the ignorant or the indifferent.

Anger and resentment throbbed against the inside of his forehead. His thoughts tumbled over one another in a welter of images and emotions until one idea finally shook itself free of the rest. She'd ruined his life, his career, and now she was bent on ruining his retirement. But he wouldn't let her get away with it. Not this time. This time Marian would have to pay.

He dried his eyes and began to plan. He must make her death appear to be an accident. He spent some time thinking about poisons. It occurred to him that he probably had an arsenal of toxins in his own apartment. Just yesterday he'd purchased a pesticide to deal with the weevils Mrs. Jordan had left behind in the kitchen when she moved out. It had a reassuring skull and crossbones right on the label.

He sprayed the contents of the can into a teacup. Leaving everything on the counter and waiting until he thought she would be taking her afternoon nap, he crept upstairs, past the jug of tea and into her condo. Did she never lock her door? Deaf as a post, she had said. Why, anyone could come in and rob her blind.

He opened the refrigerator and sure enough, there was a vial of insulin tucked into the butter-saver on the door. Slipping it into his pocket, he let himself out and took the stairs down to his own condo.

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With the syringe he kept in his first-aid kit in case of bee stings, he extracted the insulin, replaced it with weevil poison, and then crept back up to the next floor. His heart was pounding irregularly now and he had to stop and rest several times. She was still snoring in her room when he put the vial back into her refrigerator.

A siren screamed along the street and into the parking lot the next morning. Reverend Purdy was curious but decided not to risk watching the attendants wheel her away. For the first time in days, he was able to take a deep breath and look forward to an undisturbed nap on the sofa.

On the dot of seven-thirty he was jolted awake. He scrambled for his spray, trying to calm his heart as the angina assailed him.

It couldn't possibly be her television, could it? She was dead, surely. Or at least in hospital.

He staggered up to her apartment.

She was in her chair, a tissue pressed to her nose. She touched the mute button on the television.

"Oh my dear. You heard the news? Poor Hector." Her voice was quavery and for the first time she wasn't laughing. "Just taken his insulin, the one he keeps in my refrigerator, and he had the most awful spell. Going to be eighty-five next month." She stifled a sob.

"But I thought you were the diabetic."

"Oh, well, yes. Control mine with diet, though. Poor Hector's been on insulin for years." She blew her nose.

"Do they say if he'll pull through?" The Reverend was appalled at this turn of events. Enraged that she'd caused him to harm an innocent person.

"You know hospitals. Seems less said the better." She struggled forward in her chair. "Be a dear and hand me my walker?"

He picked up the aluminum walker and, on a whim, brought it down smartly in the direction of her head. But his cataracts caused him to miss and it sailed past her and deflected off the back of her chair, landing on the floor with a crash.

She looked over her shoulder, startled. "You are clumsy, aren't you, dear? Could have hurt me with that." She leaned back again, studying him.

"Can't help but notice your eyes, Reverend. Cataracts can cause you to have accidents. Get them operated on, if I were you."

Defeated, Oliver Purdy righted the walker and placed it within her reach.

"Like some of my Sunshine Tea, now you're here, dear?"

But he was already heading out the door. He'd just had another idea.

Back in his own apartment, he took six tea bags from the canister and dropped them into what was left of the bug spray in the teacup and then sat down at the kitchen table to wait until dark.

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His heart was thundering against his ribs, and he puffed more medication, wondering in a vague sort of way how much he'd already consumed that day.

When the phone rang he jumped, forgetting he'd had one installed. It was her again, asking him to come up.

"The door will be unlatched. Just let yourself in."

Gathering the soaked tea bags in a plastic bag, he took the elevator up to the next floor and, unscrewing the lid to the jar on her doorstep, dropped the bags in before ringing the bell and stepping inside.

"Surprise!" Several voices shouted at him and his heart lurched.

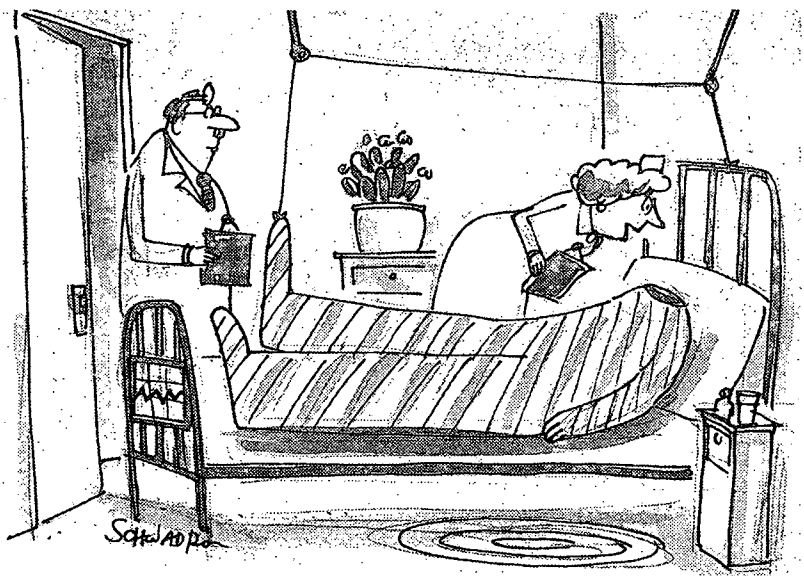
"Got word this afternoon that Hector's going to be all right." Mrs. Fenton pushed into the vestibule on her walker and beamed up at him. "So this is a combined celebration of his recovery and a party to welcome you to the complex." Her laughter burbled down the scale, reminding him of waterfalls he'd visited as a youth.

A party for him? Aside from a few rather grim congregational teas, no one had ever thrown a party in his honor. He was overwhelmed and suddenly filled with joy. His heart slammed against his ribs and he struggled for breath. "Marian . . ." he reached out to touch her arm.

"What's that, dear?"

"Marian, I always hoped . . ."

"Sorry, Reverend. Nobody here by that name. Now you just go in and meet the nice folks in there," she pointed back to the living room and then reached past him for the jug in the doorway. "The rest of us are having sherry, but I thought with you being a religious man, you'd insist on a nice cold glass of my Sunshine Tea." ©



"Come and see for yourself, Doctor—he's gone!"

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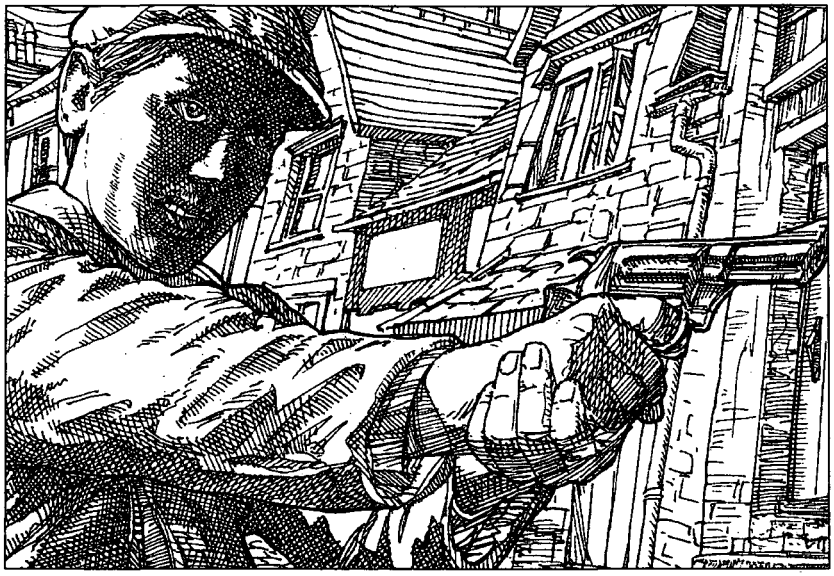

Art by Allen Davis

GUNPOINT

by Michael Z. Lewin

As Angelo walked up Walcot Street, he felt stupid. In fact, he felt worse than stupid. He felt ineffectual. He felt unmanned. He felt ashamed. He felt . . . *stupid.*

And it wouldn't even be late enough when he got home for there to be any chance that everyone would be in bed. There was little that he wanted more than to be able to slink into his place beside a sleeping Gina and hide from reality beneath a duvet.

In the event, Gina was in the kitchen alone—which was something. She was reading a catalogue at the table. "The wanderer returns," she said with a glance up.

"Sorry I'm late. I got held up."

She pointed to a picture and Angelo saw the catalogue was for surveillance equipment. "What do you think about this?" she said. "You wear it on your wrist and then, using a satellite and the accompanying CD-rom computer map, I'll be able to locate you wherever you are, anywhere in the world."

"No you won't."

"It says here I will. Only twenty-four easy payments."

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"What you'll locate," Angelo said, "is where in the world my wrist is. Who can tell about the rest."

"That's a cheery thought," Gina said.

"I'm going to make tea. Do you want some?"

When Angelo set the mugs on the table Gina closed her catalogue and threw it in the paper-recycling bin. She wasn't sure why she even read them. The agency wasn't at the high-tech end of the private-eye market and, anyway, it was her sister-in-law, Rosetta, who bought their equipment. "Thanks," she said and blew across her mug to cool the tea. "So, where were you?"

"I told you. I was held up."

"But where?"

"About twenty yards down from the cash point on Green Street."

"What's there?" He seemed to be playing a game about his later-than-usual return. There was a pub on Green Street, wasn't there? The Green Tree? So had he stopped for a drink, was that it?

"Nothing is there except a shop doorway," Angelo said, "and, like I said, I was being held up."

"Held up?"

"Yeah. As in robbed. Deprived of a portion of the cash from our hard-earned wealth."

"Good heavens. Are you all right?"

"Only on the outside."

She saw that he looked a bit pale, now that she studied him. "But . . . what happened?"

"Well, like I told the police," he began . . .

The CID officer who interviewed Angelo was not one of the many he already knew, and it soon became apparent that DC Bainton was a newcomer to Bath. "Walcot Street . . ." he said when Angelo gave his address. "Don't tell me. I know. I'm sure I know."

If he didn't know Walcot Street already, he soon would—just as soon as he wanted the best burger in town, at Schwartz Brothers, or some secondhand building materials, at Walcot Reclamation, or leather jackets, or used books, or a bicycle, or even the YMCA.

Michael Z. Lewin almost defies classification. He's an American who often reads like a British writer—a legacy, no doubt, of three decades in the U.K.; a novelist whose books have so much interesting dialogue they cry out for dramatic treatment; and an author of adult fiction that recently has been published for the YA market. There are two full-length novels in this story's series: *Family Business* (Countryman/'95), and *Family Planning* (St. Martin's/'99).

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Walcot, originally a village, had long since been subsumed into Bath proper. An arty-hippie area from the sixties, it was now becoming fashionable since it was so close to the centre of town. And, of course, the street was the site of the Lunghi Detective Agency, founded 1947. What street needed a greater claim to fame?

"Got it, got it," Bainton said. "Cadillac's Nightclub, right?"

Initial paperwork completed, Bainton asked Angelo to go through what had happened, but when he began to explain that twenty or thirty yards down Green Street from the cash point he'd been shown a gun and deprived of his fifty pounds, Bainton exclaimed, "Oh God. Not another one."

"Another one?"

"You're the fifth victim, all in the last two weeks. And, of course, there could well be more that weren't reported."

"So," Angelo said, "*is* the gun real?"

"Nobody's been stupid enough to find out, so far, if I may put it that way. Tell me, were you robbed by a man or a woman?"

"A man. You mean that there's a woman doing it too?"

"At least one," Bainton said. "In fact, I'm not at all certain just how many of them there are who're at it."

"More than two? All with guns?" It was barely conceivable. Yet there *were* shooting incidents sometimes in Bath. And kidnappings. And even murders.

"That all the robberies have been at gunpoint is one of the few things that the incidents have in common. Please, Mr. Lunghi, describe the man who robbed you."

"Well, he was about five-ten, I'd say. Thirty-five, give or take a few years. Medium build, on the thin side if anything. He wore a navy donkey jacket. Jeans. Blue—denim-coloured—trainers. I didn't see a brand logo, but they didn't look new. And the guy . . . Let's see, he had an egg-shaped face in that it was narrower at the bottom than the top but with smooth curves, not angular. He hadn't shaved for a few days and, as well, he had a light-brown moustache, covering his upper lip but not long, so either well-trimmed or newly grown. Brown hair, too, I think, under a navy—as in the colour—knit hat. I couldn't see the eyes. Sorry."

"Nevertheless," Bainton said, "a very good description."

"Thank you."

"Part of your professional training, I daresay."

"I've never been as observant about people's appearances as I'd like to be," Angelo said. "So for the last seven months I've been going to a life-drawing class once a week, and it's helped a lot. That's where I was tonight."

Bainton made a note. "And what about the man's accent?"

"Geordie. I can't say Newcastle or Gateshead or Durham specifi-

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cally, but it was definitely northeast. He even had the gall to call me 'pet.'"

Bainton smiled.

"So, is it the same man who committed the other robberies?"

"I don't know."

Angelo frowned. "Why not?"

"Do you want mustard in your beans?" Gina's poor Angelo. He needed comfort food after a shocking experience like that so she was making him beans on toast.

"Yeah, please," Angelo said.

"So why didn't Bainton know whether it was the same man or not?"

"My description was different from what the other victims have given."

"If one of them was robbed by a woman, fair enough."

"But even the guys seem to have been different from each other. They've ranged—according to the descriptions—from five-seven to 'about six feet.' They've had different builds, different hair colours, and the clothes have been different each time—I mean different in style. Like, one wore a suit and tie. Another looked like he'd been out for a run. And there was also one in 'smart casual' trousers and a polo-neck shirt and with a Welsh accent."

Something sweet to follow the beans would be good for him too, Gina thought. But what? She opened the refrigerator door. "What about the woman?"

"She was five-eight, blond curly hair, and wore a beret."

"Five-eight's quite tall for a woman."

"It used to be," Angelo said, "but I'm not so sure these days."

"There's some chocolate cake in here."

"I don't know."

"I think you should," Gina said. She took it out.

"Well, if you insist," Angelo said. "And the accents have all been different—or at least not Geordie. One of the victims said he couldn't tell what accent it was except that it was 'posh.'"

"But your guy wasn't posh if he called you 'pet.'" Gina cut a big slice from the cake and put it on a plate. Then she considered having a piece herself.

"No. My guy wasn't posh. And that's not just from how he talked. It was the way he held himself, you know? The way he walked. He's done heavy labor in his time. I'd bet on it."

"That's good observation. Your classes are working."

"I'm just trying to use my eyes more."

"And succeeding." Gina felt a certain amount of pride in the transformation, since she'd been the one who originally suggested that he sign up for the drawing classes.

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But she did not cut a piece of the chocolate cake for herself. Her mother had a widow friend who would talk about her late husband. "Whenever he bought me a dress," the widow would say, "he always bought a size too small. He never *saw*, you see." If Angelo was going to start "seeing," it was definitely not the time to snack on cake she wasn't even sure she wanted.

"I just wish I'd stood up to him instead of saying, 'Yes sir, please take my money, sir,'" Angelo was saying.

"Stood up to a man with a gun? For fifty quid?"

"How much would it have had to have been?"

"At least sixty-nine ninety-five." The beans were ready and Gina dished them out onto the toast.

"The more I think about it, the less I believe it was a real gun."

"No?"

"Thanks, love," he said as she put the plate of beans before him. "It wasn't that it didn't look real, because it did. And he even cocked it, and that sounded real enough for me. But could it really *be* real? Especially if there are several of them out there all robbing people after they've been to cash points. The one thing they have in common is the gun. Surely there can't be that number of *real* handguns, all being used in this comparatively petty way all at the same time. If you had a real handgun would you risk going down for armed robbery for fifty quid?" Angelo took a forkful of the beans. "Mmm, delicious."

"Thanks." She put his slice of cake on the table and then her temptation back in the fridge.

"To me," he said, "it sounds more like somebody came to town with a box of good replicas and flogged them off in a pub."

"Buy now and I'll throw in an instruction sheet called, 'How to rob people, California style,' no extra charge."

"Yeah," he said with a chuckle.

But it was a bit hard for Gina to visualize someone in a Bath pub saying, "Get your replica gun here!"

David, at breakfast, asked, "So what exactly did he say to you, Dad? Was it, 'Make my day'?"

"You've been watching too many violent videos," his older sister, Marie, said. She turned to Gina. "He isn't anywhere close to eighteen, Mum. How come he gets to watch 18-rated videos and I don't?" It was a current household issue, ever since Gina caught Marie and her friend Cassie in the act.

"Tell me this, face-waste," David said. "How come *you* know that's from an 18-rated video? I don't recall our celebrating *your* eighteenth birthday lately."

"Stop straining your brain against the grain," Marie said. "With a brain like yours, it's obvious you're only cut out to be a *tree* sur-

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geon when you grow up. *If* you grow up. Mum, do they let people be tree surgeons who can walk under a table without having to bend over?"

"Stop it, both of you," Gina said. "Show some respect for the fact that your father has suffered a shocking and humiliating experience."

"But that was last night," Marie said. "It's morning already."

"But," Angelo said, "old people don't recover as quickly from shock—and humiliation, thank you, dear—as you youngsters."

It should have been a cue for the Old Man to make a morning entrance from the flat above, but he didn't. Instead it was Mama who entered the kitchen. "Whose humiliation, dear, did I hear?" she asked. "Not Marie in trouble again."

"*No,*" Marie said.

"It was Dad," David said. "He was about to tell us what the man said last night when he pointed the gun at him and took all his money."

Mama frowned. "What man? What gun?"

"I don't know if it was a real gun, Mama," Angelo said. "In fact, I'm all but certain that it wasn't."

"Do you want tea, Mama?" Gina asked. "There's some in the pot."

"Yes, thank you, Gina. I'll sit down to hear this." Mama pulled out a chair and lowered herself onto it. "Ah."

"But what did he *say?*" David asked. "What, exactly?"

"Why do you care so much, feather fur?" Marie said.

"For school," David whispered. "Tell you later." He turned to his father. "Dad?"

"What he said was, 'Ay pal. D'ya not see what I've got pointed at yer jaw here?' "

"Ooo, gross accent," Marie said.

"Is Papa coming down?" Gina asked.

"Ay pal, 'e is," Mama said with a laugh.

"Even Gran's better than you, Dad," Marie said.

"We were not all privileged enough to go to a secondary school which offered Drama," Angelo said. "And what opportunities we did have we appreciated."

"Do you children want to hear about this or not?" Gina asked.

Marie turned to David and leaned to his ear. "It's for your drama project, isn't it?"

"It's on violence," David said, flicking her a nod and speaking almost too quietly for her to hear. "Go on, Dad. So what did you say?"

"Well, I said, 'Is that a gun?' and he said, 'Put it this way, pal. It's a banger you canna eat,' and then I said, 'No, it can't be.' And he said, 'If it looks like a gun, pal, and if it quacks like a gun . . . ' And he

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pulled the hammer back and it made that cocking sound, you know? And then he said, 'Worth finding out, d'ya think, pet? Because I know in yer position, me, I'd hand over the cash and not make the nasty man any more impatient than he already is.'"

"Wow," David said. He wrote furiously in a notebook.

"So I gave him the money and he walked away."

"You shouldn't have given it to him," Mama said.

"You'd have had me risk my life for fifty quid?"

"What risk?" Mama said. "Such a gun can't be real. Not in England. Not in Bath. It's not like there are guns here to murder people every day, like other countries."

That was when the Old Man came in. "Murder?" he said. "What murder?"

"No murder, Papa," Gina said, "unless you could 'murder' a cup of tea."

"The only murder I know is the Norman Stiles."

Everybody else in the kitchen groaned. The Old Man's willingness to reminisce about the agency's one true murder case was legend.

The Avon and Somerset Police were notable by their absence during the rest of the day. What with having his time filled to brimming with routine work, Angelo didn't tell the story of his "shocking and humiliating" experience again till the whole family was at the dinner table in the evening. Three times a week the Lunghis had big, sit-down meals, usually including Angelo's sister and brother, Rosetta and Salvatore.

Rosetta had her own room in the Walcot Street complex and slept there, but, having dumped one long-standing boyfriend, she was diligently searching for another, so she was often out. Except for afternoons, when she did the agency's financial business, and for the big meals.

Salvatore actually lived out, being a painter and only a family detective part-time, when needs-must. But the food at home was good and plentiful, not always the characteristics of the meals he took with, or from, the women who modelled for him. Guests were also always welcomed at the Tuesday and Thursday evening and Sunday afternoon gatherings, but this Tuesday evening only Lunghis were present.

"So was this gun a revolver or an automatic?" Salvatore asked.

Angelo paused to revisualize what he had experienced. "A revolver."

"Did you see bullets?"

"Ah," the Old Man said, "because for a revolver, a real revolver, one that's loaded, you would see bullets. This Salvatore of mine is not just a painter of pretty faces."

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"Faces are the least of it," Gina said, "unless you've changed your style recently, Sally."

"I'm quite into faces at the moment, as a matter of fact," Salvatore said.

"And when the man cocked the revolver," David said, "the chamber would have rotated one bullet, that's right, isn't it, Granddad?"

"They rotate," the Old Man said. "David's right."

"Are you going to finish your manicotti?" Mama asked him. She began to take his plate.

"My plate needs a stopwatch all of a sudden?" the Old Man said. "Huh!"

"Was it playing with cap guns that made you such a weapons expert, David?" Marie said.

"Careful," Salvatore said. "That's Davy the Kid you're talking to there. You used to dress up and everything, didn't you, David? Do you remember?"

"*Please,* Uncle Sal," David said.

Angelo said, "It was too dark for me to see whether there were bullets or not."

"Well, *I* think it's all shocking," Rosetta said. "My own brother, robbed at gunpoint. And here in Bath!"

"So, a real gunpoint," the Old Man asked, "or a plastic gunpoint?"

"It wasn't plastic," Angelo said. "There was a metal sound when he cocked it."

"That could be metal workings inside a plastic exterior," Salvatore said.

"True."

"So are we going to catch him, Dad?" David asked.

"That's the police's job, surely," Gina said.

"But if the police need help," Marie said, "they can always call for Davy the Kid."

"Shut up, Soup-for-Brains," David muttered.

Rosetta said, "It's one thing to face a man with a gun when you can't help it, and quite another to go looking for him."

"You want to look for these gunpoints?" the Old Man said to Angelo. "Who pays? Who's the client? Do we hire ourselves now? We'll starve to death."

"We'll all starve to death if you don't either eat your manicotti or let me take the plate away," Mama said. "We're waiting for you to finish so we can have these nice cannoli Gina made."

"I didn't make them today, Mama," Gina said. "I was too busy, so I bought them at Marks. I don't know if they're nice or not."

"We'll never know till this old man makes up his stomach."

"So take the plate away," the Old Man said. "I'll sacrifice for my family, like always."

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Immediately Mama took the plate away. "They *look* nice," she said.

"It hadn't occurred to me that *we* might try to find this guy," Angelo said, "although now that you mention it . . ."

"There's always the fifty quid he took off you, Dad, if you get it back," David said.

"I'll go looking for him if *I* can have the fifty quid," Marie said.

"You will *not,*" Gina said.

"You wouldn't know where to start," David said. "That's what happens when you have slop for brains. Sad but true."

"Well," Mama said, taking a cannoli, "*I* would like to find this Gordie who stole from my son."

"He was a Geordie, Mama, not a Gordie," Angelo said.

"Whatever he calls himself, I'd tell him a thing or two." She took a bite. "Not bad. Not so bad."

"It's just we've been so busy," Gina said.

"I'd start with the police," Marie said. "I'd start by going to Charlie and asking him exactly what the police know about it so far."

"These robbers ought to be caught," Rosetta said. "I hate the idea that someone might point a gun at me. Did the cop—"

"Bainton," Angelo said.

"Did Bainton say whether any women had been robbed?"

"I didn't ask. And all he said was that one of the rob*bers* was female."

"Making her a robb*ess?*" said Salvatore, whose interest in feminine endings was long-established.

"Charlie would have it on his computer," Marie said, "including where the victims were robbed, which might be a clue, too."

"Well," Salvatore said, "counta me in iffa we gonna revenge-a my brother. Eh, whata these robbers they thinking? Messa with my brother, you messa with me, you messa with my whole-a family."

"Ooo, gross accent, Uncle Sal," Marie said.

In fact, it was Rosetta who went to the police station the next morning, not Marie. And it was DC Bainton she asked for, not the family friend, Charlie, who worked on the police computers.

Bainton was on duty and happy to talk to her but he didn't have much to add to what Angelo had already reported. "Except," Bainton said, "that there was another robbery last night. It was . . ." He consulted his notes. "At about a quarter to ten. A woman had just taken money out of a machine at the railway station and was on her way to the bus station to catch a bus."

"A woman?" Rosetta said.

"It is," Bainton said. "The first female victim."

"But that's awful," Rosetta said.

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"And embarrassing," Bainton said, "considering that it took place only a few meters from where we're sitting now."

"What description did the victim give last night?"

"Male, Afro-Caribbean, five feet nine, twenty-five to thirty-five, heavy—'Built like a rugby player,' was what she said."

Rosetta shook her head. That could hardly be the man who robbed Angelo.

"The only other thing," Bainton said, "is that when she handed over the seventy pounds she'd just taken out of the machine, he gave her thirty back."

"He what?"

"He told her he only needed forty and said, 'Thanks just the same.'"

"That's a new wrinkle for a stickup artist," Gina said when Rosetta came back to the office before lunch. "Angelo's going to want a refund."

"And Bill agrees with us that the guns probably aren't real," Rosetta said.

"'Bill'?" Gina asked.

"Bill, DC Bainton."

"So what's he like?"

"Well, he *is* kind of cute. But younger than me. Is that important, do you think?"

"For him to be so much younger than you that it mattered," Gina said, "he'd have to still be in primary school."

"Yeah, I do hate to go lower than middle school," Rosetta said. Then she blushed.

The cheeks told Gina that her sister-in-law was interested. "Is he single?"

"I think so. I do know he's only been in Bath a few weeks. Do you think he'd like someone to show him around?"

Angelo missed lunch at home but returned to the office early in the afternoon. Gina brought him up to date.

"Bainton may be new to town," Angelo said, "but he's already managed to find his own way to Cadillac's."

"I don't think Rose had the top-of-a-bus, tour-guide kind of show-him-around in mind herself."

Angelo filled the kettle with water so he could make tea. "So are we really working on this case now?"

"Rose wants to. And she did get details of all six incidents."

"So it's Rose on the case, not Marie?"

"Or David," Gina said. "For the moment."

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But when David got home from school he found Rosetta waiting in the kitchen to meet him. It was an unusual thing for his aunt to do. "Is something up, Auntie Rose?"

"I've been working on the gunpoints."

"Oh yeah?"

"I went to the police this morning and I've been putting the information I got onto the computer. Do you want to see?"

Computer and detection was too heady a mix for Davy the Kid ever to turn down. Even though he had a lot of homework to do and a difficult question to ask someone.

But maybe Auntie Rose was the person to ask. Especially if it was before Marie got back from hanging out after school with all those ugly pierced friends she seemed to think so highly of. "Actually, Auntie Rose," David said, "there was something I wanted to ask you."

"What?" Rosetta said as they went down the hall toward the room that doubled as her office and her bedroom.

"Do you have a dress that might fit me? I mean, like an old one. One you wouldn't mind me borrowing?"

Dinner on Wednesday nights was made from cold or reheated foods, but as Gina and Angelo were getting the last of what was available onto the table only Marie was at the table.

"What's the time?" Angelo asked. "I thought we were already late. Am I fast?"

"Marie," Gina said, "will you go call your brother and your aunt?"

"My brother is an ant." Marie got up, but before she left the room she said, "Dad, do you want to know why your only begotten son was so eager for you to tell him exactly what your robber said?"

Angelo was surprised by the question. What "why" could there be? David was interested. He was always interested. "Why?"

"Because the little worm has a *drama* project on violence."

"On violence?"

"It's the kind of thing they assign beginners in Drama," Marie said. "Especially boys. They don't understand dramatic nuances, so the teachers assign them subjects with hitting and shouting. It's all they understand, the poor dears." Marie tossed her hair with a sweep of her head. "So Davy, Davy the Kid, and his little-boy cronies are putting together a drama project that will reenact what happened to you and what happened to some of the other victims. And, because they can't make up dialogue, Davy had you say it all for him. Didn't you see how he was taking notes?"

"How do you know all this?" Gina asked.

"One of the girls in my—advanced—Drama class has a little

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brother in Davy's. In *my* class, subtlety is the name of the game. They are *so* young, these little boys."

Marie left the kitchen to fetch the in-house little boy.

But Marie only got a couple of steps into the connecting hall when David burst past her, shoving her against the wall as he passed. More surprising was the way Rosetta followed him, moving almost as quickly.

"Mum, Dad," David shouted. "Auntie Rose and I think we've got it."

"I think you got it this morning," Angelo said. "You were taking notes, weren't you?" He was cutting tomatoes and did not turn around.

Gina was putting olive oil and bread onto the table. She was in a good position to see that her son was wearing a full skirt and a peasant blouse. "David?"

"See, Auntie Rose and I were talking it through," David said. "All the guns and all the people robbing people."

"Men, women, Geordies, Welsh, West Indians," Rosetta said, nearly as animated and breathless as her nephew.

"David, why are you wearing your aunt's line-dance clothes?" Gina said.

Angelo cocked his head. "He's what?"

"I was just trying them on," David said. "But see, it just doesn't make sense for there to be all those different guns in Bath."

"So we followed the logic of the thing," Rosetta said. "If it doesn't make sense for there to be lots of guns, then maybe there *is* only one gun."

"It suits you, Davy," Marie said, returning to the kitchen. "Davy the Ewe."

"Only one gun?" Angelo said.

"One gun," David said, "but lots of people sharing it. Do you see? A bunch of friends, maybe. Or a commune or something. When one of them needs some money he—"

"Or she," Rosetta said.

"Whoever, the person takes the gun and robs someone of whatever he or she needs."

"Which is why the one last night gave some money back."

"Hmm," Gina said, sitting down, "that makes a certain amount of sense, I suppose. A commune . . . Hmmm."

"But then," Rosetta said.

"It was when I tried on one of Auntie Rose's dresses," David said, "only it was too long."

"Yes, what is that for?" Angelo asked.

"His drama group is all boys," Rosetta said.

"We've been hearing about this drama group."

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"So if one of the characters in their scene is female, one or other of them has to pretend."

"They call it *acting,*" Marie said, "when the students reach a higher level of maturity."

"Acting. That's it exactly," David said.

"Because when we talked about what kind of people might be in this group of friends who shared the gun, and went through the details of the descriptions given by the victims, it doesn't make sense."

"Their point," Angelo said later when Salvatore dropped in to see if there was any work, "is that groups tend to get together because they are similar. They're all from one place, or they're all in the same job, or they're all homeless."

"Or they're all from the same family," Salvatore said.

"And the witness descriptions were so different," Gina said. "Angelo's Geordie, a posh guy, a jogging guy, a woman, a West Indian. There was also a smart-casual Welshman."

"So you're saying this group of people wouldn't be a group?" Salvatore asked.

"It's hard to see what kind of group they would be," Angelo said, "especially if they're also a group which puts guns under people's noses and demands money."

"So, if I understand this properly, Rosetta and David's breakthrough . . . Where are they, by the way?"

"Rosetta's changing clothes because the policeman she likes is coming," Gina said. "David's upstairs because he wanted to explain it to Mama and Papa."

"What he's explaining," Salvatore said, "if I've got it right, is that, on the one hand, there can't be a lot of guns, so there must be a lot of people sharing one gun. And on the other hand, there can't be this particular group of people sharing the gun because they're too diverse."

"That's it exactly," Angelo said.

When Bill Bainton arrived at the Lunghis' flat it was Rosetta who ushered him into the living room. There Gina, Angelo, Salvatore, Marie, and David were waiting. "So this is the family that runs the detective agency," Bainton said. "How do you do?"

"Grandma and Granddad live upstairs," David said, "but they'll be down in a second."

And it was only a moment later that everyone heard the eldest Lunghis on the stairs. When the Old Man entered he was saying, "So who is it to tell the policeman about the ducks?"

"David will, I'm sure. Not you," Mama said. "Oh, look. He's here already."

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"Ducks?" DC Bainton said.

"It's a syllogism," David said. "We were talking about them in math at school."

"Oh," Bainton said.

"It goes like this. If you know that all ducks quack, and that Marie does not quack—"

"Keep me out of your sillyisms," Marie said.

"If all ducks quack, and Marie's friend Cassie does not quack," David said, "what can you deduce?"

DC Bainton looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Rosetta said, "The conclusion is that Cassie is not a duck, Bill."

"Wouldn't you know that by looking at her?" Bainton said.

"The way it applies here," Rosetta said, "is that if there can only be one gun, and there can't realistically be so many different people sharing it . . ." She opened her hands, which everyone but the detective constable knew to be an invitation to draw a conclusion or make a speculation.

Bainton just waited.

Rosetta said, "Then the conclusion is that maybe only one person is using it after all."

"One person?" Bainton said.

"One person who dresses up in different clothes. One person who speaks in different accents."

"And who does different walks," Angelo said. "Because the guy who robbed me *walked* just the way he would if he had the voice he had."

"What?" Bainton said. "You mean like an actor?"

Even after Rosetta and David's breakthrough, it was not obvious how the police should proceed. Staking out all the city cash points day and night was impossible from a manpower and police-budget point of view. And finding one particular actor in Bath was almost as daunting. The place was teeming with actors, especially if you counted amateur-dramatics participants, students, and those residents who naturally made dramas out of molehills.

"But the guy who robbed you is good, right?" Salvatore asked Angelo when the family repaired to the kitchen for a cuppa after Bainton left.

"He certainly convinced me," Angelo said.

"And none of the other victims said, 'He sounded like he was putting on an accent,' did they, Sis?"

Rosetta's mind was on other things, but after the question was repeated she agreed that none of the victims had reported any doubt that the robber was what he, or she, appeared to be.

"Doesn't that make it likely that he's a pro?" Salvatore said.

"That makes sense," Gina said. "So are you suggesting that the

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police contact Equity for names of all their members who live here?"

"Mightn't that be what we would do next if the case was ours?"

"What 'ours'?" the Old Man said. "We have a client all of a sudden?"

"I think it's better to make the actor come to us," Marie said. "Are there any biscuits, Ma?"

"Of course," Gina said. She put the biscuit tin on the table.

"How do you mean, 'come to us,' Marie?" Angelo said.

"Well, not everyone interested in the thespian arts is a show-off," Marie said, "but the ones interested in *violence* and guns usually are." She stared at David.

"What thespian art?" Mama said. "I don't understand." She opened the biscuit tin as Gina began to fill cups with tea.

Marie said, "Why not announce in the papers that the police are going to do a reconstruction, like for *Crime Watch.* Announce that they're auditioning for actors who live in Bath who can do different accents. I bet this gun actor couldn't resist, thinking he was putting something over on us."

"What *us?*" the Old Man said. "Who pays? That's what I want to know."

"You know, it's not a bad idea my niece has there," Salvatore said. "It should at least be worth passing on to our new friend, Bainton."

"I'll do that," Rosetta said quickly. "In the morning. First thing."

"If they do catch him that way," Marie said, "does that mean I get the fifty quid?"

In the event, however, the police got their actor by different means. Saturday, after the Bath rugby match, he dressed as a Harlequins supporter and waved his gun under the nose of a young woman near the rugby ground. However, it turned out that the young woman not only watched Bath Rugby Football Club, she played flanker for the leading local women's team. The actor ran but he was no match for her. She delivered him to the police station personally.

Bill Bainton rang the Lunghis in the evening to let them know, and that made it natural for Rosetta to invite him to Sunday lunch. This time, when surrounded by the family, he was much more relaxed than before. "This is delicious, Mrs. Lunghi," he said. "What is it again?"

"A kind of lasagna," Mama said, "with a special sauce they make only in the village from which I came. A sauce which passes from mother to daughter. They never write it down. You have to marry into such a sauce. Like he did." She nodded toward the Old Man.

The Old Man had his mouth full but began to speak.

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"Hush," Mama said. "This nice young man doesn't want to hear your mouth." She beamed at Bainton.

"So it *was* an actor?" Angelo said.

"He is indeed," Bainton said. "And, you'll be relieved to learn that the gun he used was a replica. A very good replica, but replica nonetheless. He got it from the prop department of a movie he was in, apparently."

"He's been in movies?" Marie said.

"Not many," Bainton said. "He's been most successful at things like radio plays and voice-overs on commercials. Which explains how he's so good at different accents."

"If he's so successful," Salvatore said, "then why in the world was he robbing people at cash points?"

"Last Christmas he was arrested for drunk driving and he lost his license," Bainton said. "Being unable to drive has hit him hard financially. He can still get to London, but now he has to take the train instead of going on his motorcycle."

"He has a motorcycle?" Marie said.

"And with the cost of train travel, he all but loses money every time he works. Or so he says. To listen to him, it's been a very rough year for him."

"But not so rough that we feel sorry for a man who robs," Angelo said.

"Of course not. Or a man who drinks and then drives," Bainton said. "But his idea was that the police wouldn't work out his modus operandi if it was a different person each time who committed the crime."

"He convinced me," Angelo said.

"Well, he'll have plenty of opportunity to keep in practice while he's in prison," Bainton said. "My fiancée is a probation officer and she tells me that almost every prison in the country has a drama group."

"Your fiancée?" Rosetta and Mama asked at the same time.

"Yes, Beryl," Bainton said. "She'll be moving here as soon as she can get reassigned. Which can't be too soon for me. It's tough, living alone. Let me tell you."

After a moment and a sigh, Mama said, "Would you care for another helping of this lasagna, Mr. Bill Bainton? So the memory of what it tastes like will last you?" ●

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OUTSOURCING

by Henry Slesar

The Short Mystery Fiction Society's 1999 Derringer Award for Lifetime Achievement went to one of *EQMM*'s most valued veterans, Henry Slesar. Mr. Slesar's first story for us was published in 1956. Since then, he has written nearly fifty full-length *EQMM* stories; he is also the creator of one of our occasional puzzle features, The Final Paragraph.

My name is Howard Meltzer, and I am the Associate Director of Marketing at Bowman-Johnson. You're not impressed? That's because B. J. doesn't make any sexy consumer products. We supply various industrial odds and ends to manufacturing companies here and abroad. More abroad, lately. That's the way things are going in this service economy.

I've had this job for eight-plus years. My boss is Vice President Joseph ("call me Joe") Fanning. Joe is a nineteen-year veteran with B. J., but he stopped being happy in his work fifteen months ago. That was when Mort Cunningham was hired by our Board to fix our lagging sales and slowing production. He had been a management consultant with McKinsey before joining us. The old man (Bob Bowman, our chairman) had been impressed by his vigor when he vetted our company and declared that we were suffering from dry rot. Too many fat cats at the top. Too much complacency. Whips had to be cracked.

Cunningham had been cracking that whip for the past year, on the backs of all the B. J. department heads. Naturally, they hated him. No, that's too mild a word. Try "despised." Or "loathed." Loathing is good. Loathing was the reason for the meeting in the Small Conference Room. Joe Fanning was chairman pro tem. Then there was our Research & Development head, Sam Buloff, Production Manager Andrew Switzer, and the irritatingly handsome Keith Dixon, head of Personnel. I was the last arrival, because, as low man on the organizational chart, I'd been appointed secretary of our little ad hoc committee and had to print out the minutes of our last meeting.

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"What have we got, what have we got?" Joe said in his hurried voice, shaking his foot to get rid of nervous energy. Joe had a wasted look, and it was perceivable that his thin body was covered with welts from Cunningham's daily lashings.

I started to read the minutes, and Sam Buloff screeched like a woman. (He's a big, muscular type, this Sam, but I always thought there was something effeminate in his manner.) "You mean you wrote it *down?*" he said incredulously. "Are you out of your mind, Howie?"

"Don't worry," I said, a bit stiffly. "I'll shred the notes as soon as this meeting is over."

"Then let's get it over!" Andy said. "I've got a production meeting in half an hour. Mort is going to be there. One minute late, he'll pull out what's left of my fingernails."

I cleared my throat. "April twenty-first, all committee members present. We dispensed with old business and discussed several alternative methods of solving the M.C. problem." I looked at them over my bifocals to make sure they understood. "Andy stated the case for a plant accident, but Joe pointed out that M.C. never visited a plant. Sam agreed about the accident in principal but thought it would have to be vehicular or something of that nature. There were no approved suggestions about how to accomplish this."

I paused to take a breath, but even a few seconds were too much for Joe Fanning. "Go on, go on!" he said. "We know all this crap. Let's start the meeting."

"Just one more note," I said, determined to be thorough. "The committee appointed Sam Buloff to make a study of M.C.'s personal habits and movements in order to determine if there was a window of opportunity."

"Ball in your court, Sam," Joe said.

They were all staring at him, and Sam was pleased. Usually, research reports inspired yawns, groans, and feet-shuffling. This time not.

"M.C., as you know, is a bachelor. Divorced, to be more accurate. He lives alone on Lake Drive in the Piedmont Houses, a cluster of new brownstones on the lagoon. Subletting. Can't afford to buy yet, at least not until when and if he marries Alice Bowman."

It wasn't news that Cunningham had been in hot pursuit of Bowman's daughter since day one. It was the reason for our sense of urgency. If he succeeded, we all knew the fat lady had sung.

But Dixon was suddenly grinning. "I've got some new business," he said. "I've been dating Martina, M.C.'s secretary."

"Against company policy," Joe said.

"Right," Dixon nodded smugly. "Adds to the pleasure. So did

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something she told me, at a moment of gratitude. Cunningham's got a girlfriend."

Nobody cheered. "So what?" Andy said. "He's not a Trappist monk. I wish he was. I wish he'd take a vow of silence so I'd never have to hear that whining voice again."

But Joe was interested. "It might give us some leverage," he said. "Lady Alice might not like it. She might dump him, get Daddy to dump him, too."

"In your dreams," Andy said harshly. "Daddy and his little Alice would be worried only if Mort *didn't* like girls."

Sam looked bored. "Alice Bowman was engaged to marry last year, remember? She changed her mind after she met Cunningham. Mort would drop his girlfriend in two shakes if he could hook the boss's daughter. Let's face it, gentlemen. He's holding all the aces."

"That's why we formed this committee, and it's time we went into a decision phase," Joe said. "How do we terminate Cunningham? We were all going to submit at least one workable proposal, remember? Who's going to start?" He looked at us in turn, and Andy cleared his throat and said:

"Mort eats in the executive dining room every day. If we can get access to the kitchen, we could add a little something to the Gold Plate special."

Joe made a note on his legal pad. "It's not a bad thought. We'll need a feasibility study. Research possible substances, preferably of the nondetectable variety."

Andy Switzer frowned. "You guys watch too much television. There are damned few 'undetectable' poisons, and even if you found one, how would you slip it into a lobster bisque or lamb stew without being seen? There are five employees in that kitchen at all times."

"Maybe we can get to one of them," Sam Buloff suggested. "There's a Filipino, two Chinese, one Korean, one God-knows-what. Maybe they'd all like to go back home to their families, with fat wallets."

Joe was shaking his right foot violently. "And what happens if we make one of them an offer and he runs straight to Mort or the old man?"

"Impractical," Andy said. "We need something more direct. Follow the s.o.b. some night, shoot him, take his wallet, looks like a robbery, end of story ."

"Is that your proposal?" Joe snorted. "And who's going to be the shooter, Andy, you?"

"You got a better idea?"

"Half a dozen. We invite him for a boat ride and push him over the side. We ask him to a roof party and shove him off the edge. We take him to dinner and put some of Keith's undetectable poi-

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son into his Stoly martini. . . ."

"This is getting us nowhere," Keith said. "Let's face it, guys, none of us are qualified to do this job. There's only one alternative, and we've known it from the beginning. We've got to outsource."

"Do what?" Andy said.

"Go outside to find a specialist. Hell, Bowman-Johnson does outsourcing all the time, so why can't we?"

"Are you talking about hiring a hit man?"

Keith tossed his legal pad on the table with a slapping sound. "I'm saying we all lack the resources for this particular task. We need a specialist, and, fortunately, I know just where to find him."

Four mouths around the table dropped open. The sight made Keith grin, and he looked directly at me.

"Don't put it in the minutes, okay? The man's name is Jeremy Watts. He's a professional. It's what he does for a living. He's only been caught once, but he had a smart lawyer who plea-bargained for Manslaughter and Watts was back on the street in four years. I happen to know that he's looking for a temp job right now."

"How do you know?" Joe said.

"My older brother Dale. Did I ever tell you about my older brother? I guess not. He's in Wall Street, got nailed on an Insider Trading deal, serving three-to-five in Ossining."

"Pretty stiff for a white-collar crime. Why didn't they send him to one of those country-club prisons?"

"They did," Keith Dixon said, looking pleased with himself; but then, he always was. "He got into a fight with a guard there, put him in the hospital. They transferred him to a hard-time facility, and that's how he met Watts. Old Dale, he got a kick out of having a cellmate who was a real hired killer. Made him feel macho or something."

Andy was rubbing his bald spot, sure sign of nerves. "And you think we can hire this individual to—do what has to be done?"

"Dale says Watts needs capital. He'll do the job for ten K, maybe even less. All work guaranteed. Minimal contact. Dale told me, even if he gets caught, the rap will be armed robbery. That's how he stays viable."

"Just how 'minimal' will the contact be?"

"One of us will have to meet with him. Maybe wear a disguise. Wig, moustache, glasses. Sounds corny," Keith grinned. "But it's the only way."

Joe, Andy, and Sam were all looking at each other. Then they were all looking at me, and it was my turn to rub my bald spot.

"Howie would be perfect," Sam says. "He's, what's the word? Nondescript. No offense, Howie."

"No offense," I said. "But no, thank you. I don't look so good in a wig or a beard, and I already wear glasses."

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Andy smiled, probably thinking it was ingratiating.

"You can wear dark glasses, Howie. And if the guy is a professional, like Keith says, he won't be looking at you too closely."

"Besides," Keith said, "you're just about the last person in the company anybody would suspect. That's a compliment, Howie, a compliment."

"And remember," Joe Fanning said, dropping a hand on my shoulder, "we're all in this together. If you get nailed, we all get nailed. All for one, one for all."

"But why do I have to be the *one?*"

Even as I made my feeble protest, I knew it wasn't going to do any good. They were all senior. They had the votes. And I had the short straw.

We met at Boomer's, a trendy little tavern in a gentrified downtown area. This came as a surprise to me, because I would have assumed that a man in Watts's profession would hang around waterfront bars or venues of that type. I was relieved, but I was also a bit chagrined. I had created a persona more suitable to a tawdry dive than a singles bar. I wore a pea jacket my son Danny had bought in an Army-Navy store. I had a fake moustache that actually gave my admittedly bland features a little character—I toyed with the idea of growing my own. I skipped the beard, but did the dark glasses. They were a nuisance in the dim lighting of Boomer's, and I soon removed them after I identified Jeremy Watts by the rose between his teeth. Only kidding. Keith Dixon had given me a good description of the man. Late thirties, short, narrow-shouldered, a little pockmarked, a prominent nose, and a nice warm smile.

Watts was sitting in a booth. There were several available, the young crowd choosing to cluster around the bar, networking, flirting, exhilarated by their proximity. I didn't have to identify myself, I just sat down opposite him and Watts gave me a friendly nod and asked if I wanted a drink. I ordered a beer, but only for appearances. When it arrived, I took the fat brown envelope out of my pocket and put it on the table in front of him.

"How much?" Watts said succinctly.

"Four thousand, five hundred," I said. "The rest upon completion."

He hefted the envelope and grinned.

"It's all in small bills," I said, "just like you asked."

I was beginning to enjoy myself. It felt like a scene from a movie, and I was the star. I felt as if my face was changing, my jaw hardening, my eyes turning steely.

Then I gave him a description of the target. Told him the address. Suggested the best time to implement. He nodded all through my recitation, absorbing it, already making plans.

"Okay," Watts said. The envelope disappeared into the big shape-

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less coat he wore. "Watch the six o'clock news. Tomorrow night, maybe the day after. It all depends."

He stood up, and I was disappointed. I wanted this dangerous rendezvous to continue. I wanted to savor the moment, but it had gone by too fast. I had just sent a hit man on a murderous errand, and the experience had been as flat as the beer that was still untouched in my glass.

The banality of evil.

The committee didn't meet again for the next twenty-four hours. We nodded at each other in hallways. Andy and I had lunch in the cafeteria, and we talked baseball. Sam Buloff was in Mexico, looking for a plant site. Keith Dixon winked at me once. Joe Fanning kept dropping assignments on me, all the crap he didn't want to do. It was like all other days at Bowman-Johnson.

Three nights later, we all watched the six o'clock news on our separate television sets.

A man who used the aliases of Bill Simmons and Jeremy Watts was attempting a burglary at Terrace Apartments on Lake Drive when he was shot and killed by a security guard, but not until he had killed a woman named Cheryl Edwards, a waitress and sometimes exotic dancer at the Blue Ballroom on Highway 22. An autopsy revealed that Cheryl Edwards was five months' pregnant.

When I met Mort Cunningham in the parking lot, he was whistling as he got out of his silver Porsche. It wasn't even seven-thirty in the morning, but Mort always arrived early and stayed late. It was one more thing that endeared him to Bob Bowman, but I suspected that his hours would shorten up once he was married to Bob's daughter. The wedding was set for early June. Trust Mort to honor tradition.

"All right, Howie," he said. "Just what is it you want to know?"

"That woman whose address you gave me," I said. "You left something out of the description. You didn't tell me she was pregnant."

Mort gave me one of his patented scowls.

"Why do you think it had to be done? She was threatening me, Howie. Said she would go to the old man, maybe even Alice." He smiled now. He had perfect teeth. "I've got a headhunter looking for replacements for your committee pals. But Joe Fanning gets the axe this afternoon." He slapped me on the shoulder. "It's about time you got a break, Howie. You've earned it."

He walked away whistling.

The next morning, I moved into Joe's office. There was already a nasty memo from Mort in my IN box, in the same poisonous language he always used. I looked down and saw that my foot was beginning to shake. And I thought, next time, no outsourcing. Next time, an in-house job. ●

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Art by Mark Evans

The Sword of Colonel Ledyard

by Edward D. Hoch

General Washington was standing with his hands clasped behind him, deep in thought, when Alexander Swift entered his quarters at the encampment near Staten Island. It was early September in 1781, nearly a year since Benedict Arnold's treasonous attempt to surrender West Point to the British.

"You wished to see me, General?" he asked, announcing his arrival.

"Alexander, yes. You've served us well in the past and I find I must call upon you again. As you know, Benedict Arnold is now a brigadier general in the British army. He caused us no end of grief with his incursion into Virginia last December and now he is on the move again. I have information that he returned to New York in June and is preparing for a new operation."

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Swift had not seen Arnold since the morning he confronted him on board the British ship *Vulture,* following the traitor's flight to avoid capture at West Point.* He had never expected to cross paths with the man again. His voice may have betrayed his apprehension as he asked, "What sort of operation?"

Washington gestured toward a map of the area. "I came here with every intention of mounting an attack on New York, to drive the British from the city once and for all. After reconnoitering the ground, I have concluded we could not succeed against the superior enemy forces. Instead I have decided to move south with my army and attempt to engage Cornwallis in Virginia. We march in two days' time."

"Where does Arnold figure in all this?"

"I have received secret intelligence that he will mount an expedition somewhere in Connecticut in hope of diverting a portion of my army from the campaign in Virginia. I cannot spare any troops and still go up against Cornwallis, even with promised help from the French. You must do what you can to learn Arnold's plans and warn the Connecticut militia."

"Where will he strike?"

Washington shook his head sadly. "I have no idea."

Edward D. Hoch's Revolutionary War mystery series is one of your editor's favorites. Not only does it treat us to some of the most complex puzzles of Mr. Hoch's devising (in this case, a locked-room whodunit!), it always manages to bring alive this thrilling period in history with allusions to real events and persons. In this new tale, the author assures us that "Benedict Arnold's attack on New London, and the unusual fate of Colonel Ledyard, are historically accurate."

In his heart, Alexander Swift had hoped that Washington would at last be able to free New York from British occupation. Since early in the war, Swift's private life had been a jumble, with a former wife living in New York under British rule and his passionate love, Molly, awaiting him at West Point. Though Amanda had left him for a British officer, now dead, he still felt some obligation toward her so long as the British held the city.

Now his mission for General Washington would take him away again, and he rode up to West Point to tell Molly. She worked at a tavern called the Nugget of Gold and lived in an upstairs room where he often spent some time. He'd brought with him a map of

* See "The Vulture in the Mist," *EQMM* August, 1999.

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Connecticut that he studied while they ate. "I believe he will attack by sea," he told Molly. "But where?"

"Someplace he knows well," she suggested. "Isn't Arnold from there?"

He tried to remember. "I believe you're right. Before the war he had a bookstore in New Haven. But I don't think he grew up there."

"They must have his records at the fort."

She was right, of course. In the morning he walked down the hill to Fort West Point and quickly learned that Benedict Arnold had been born and raised near New London, about fifty miles east of New Haven. "I think that's it," he told Molly later. "I believe he's planning to lead an assault on New London."

"Would he really attack his boyhood home? Against his former neighbors, even his schoolmates?"

"He hates America so much, that's exactly what he would do."

"Will you go there, Alex?"

Swift nodded. "I have to warn them if I can."

"It's no more than guesswork."

"Washington's intelligence is that he's headed for Connecticut. I think New London is the most likely place. The town is an important port for privateers and has a large quantity of military stores."

They ferried him across the Hudson at West Point and he rode on to the east toward the Connecticut border. He reckoned the journey at close to 150 miles, and knew he'd have to stop somewhere overnight. The following morning he continued on, and the city of New London came into view shortly after noon. It was the fifth day of September.

Swift stopped first at Fort Trumbull on the west bank of the Thames River. Trumbull, facing the harbor, was defended by a captain and a company of twenty-four men. Swift warned of the possibility of an attack and then continued on. Fort Griswold, on the eastern side of the river, had more men, nearly 150 in all, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Ledyard. Its square fortification, with twelve-foot stone walls surrounded by a ditch and a line of pointed spikes, seemed to be safe from attack, but Swift knew it would not stop Arnold for long.

"Colonel Ledyard," he said, extending his hand as he was ushered into the man's presence. They'd met once before at Washington's encampment. "I bring you word from General Washington."

"News reaches me that he is moving south," Ledyard said. He was a youngish man in full uniform, with a sword at his side. "Is that true?"

"It is, but he fears the traitor Benedict Arnold, now a British

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commander, may launch an attack in this area to force the general to commit part of his army here."

"I believe we can handle ourselves," the colonel replied, but Swift could see that the news troubled him.

"I have been riding much of the day. May I spend the night here?"

"Certainly. You will dine with my wife and my officers tonight."

There were five officers at Fort Griswold in addition to Colonel Ledyard, and they seemed to be seated by seniority around the dinner table. Major Sullivan's hair was turning gray and he was probably older than the colonel. There were two captains, Rolph and Dunwiddy, both youngish men with dark hair. The remaining two were lieutenants, the sandy-haired Fox and the stocky Yates, both of whom seemed a bit nervous at Swift's presence.

The chair to Ledyard's right was empty, and while they awaited the arrival of his wife the colonel passed on Alexander Swift's news. "We don't know that Arnold will attack here, but if he's heading for Connecticut this could be a logical target, given his familiarity with the city. The troops must be on alert at all times."

Major Sullivan raised a tactical question but all such conversation ceased as Emily Ledyard joined them at the table and every man stood up. She was a striking woman with deep brown eyes and a long, swanlike neck. When she took the seat next to her husband it was as if a queen had entered their company. "Darling, this is Alexander Swift, on a special mission for General Washington," Ledyard explained. "Mr. Swift, my wife Emily."

"How do you do," he said with a slight bow of his head. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"But not under the best of circumstances," she replied, "in the midst of a revolution." Her eyes sparkled and she pushed a stray hair away from them. "Will we have trouble here at Fort Griswold?"

"I trust not, Mrs. Ledyard. We are doing everything we can to prevent it."

"Will there be reinforcements?"

"We can hope so. They have been promised."

She could only sigh. "The war has been difficult for everyone. William and I used to go rock climbing in Vermont each summer. Now we stay here and wait for an attack I pray will never come."

Her husband turned to Captain Rolph. "Is the nine-pounder in position?" he asked, referring to the cannon that was one of the fort's major weapons of defense.

"It is, Colonel."

"We should be safe for the night. Even Arnold would wait for daylight to attack."

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"Arnold?" his wife repeated. "Would that be the traitor, Benedict Arnold?"

"The same. But Mr. Swift has no real evidence that he will attack New London."

As the food was served, the conversation drifted into other matters. Mrs. Ledyard was the only woman at the fort, staying there occasionally while maintaining her home in the city. Captain Dunwiddy had actually been born in England rather than the colonies, but came to America with his family at an early age. All of them had one thing in common, a fierce loyalty to their cause and a belief that they must remain free from British rule.

Dinner ended with a toast to General Washington, proposed by Colonel Ledyard.

Early the following morning, Lieutenant Yates came running to Swift's room to tell him that British troops had landed under cover of darkness and were attacking on both sides of the harbor. Though he'd been warning against the possibility, the news that it was actually happening still surprised Swift. He hurried up to the parapet to view the situation. The British had indeed landed, with what appeared to be a full division of redcoats on either side of the river. Both of the American forts were greatly outnumbered, facing some 1,700 enemy troops, with British ships anchored offshore already bombarding the town with their cannon. Swift could see that four companies on the west bank of the Thames were being detached to attack Fort Trumbull.

"That officer seems to be leading the main force," Yates said, handing his spyglass to Swift.

Focusing the small telescope on the central British column, he immediately recognized the officer at its head. "It's General Arnold, just as I'd feared." Even as they watched, Arnold's troops overran a small redoubt and pressed on toward the town. The division on the east side of the river immediately moved forward toward Fort Griswold. During the terrible hour that followed, the British commander, announcing himself as Lieutenant Colonel Eyre, called upon the fort to surrender, but Colonel Ledyard quickly refused. Eyre then divided his forces and launched an attack on two sides of the fort simultaneously. The outnumbered garrison at Griswold returned heavy fire, and from his observation point Swift saw the British colonel go down.

"Get me a weapon," he told Yates, who passed him the musket of one of their dead soldiers.

The attacking forces came on a second time, making a lodgment in the defensive ditch and tearing down a section of the pointed stakes. They were briefly repulsed, but on the third try they mounted each other's shoulders and succeeded in climbing over

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the parapet. The fort's nine-pound cannon took its toll, but in the end even the stubborn defense of the garrison was no match for the superior numbers of the attacking force. Major Sullivan received a fatal bayonet thrust from a British soldier and Swift could almost see the fighting spirit drain from Colonel Ledyard's body. The walls had been breached and surrender was the only option.

Ledyard called upon his men to cease fire. Then he drew his sword and held it out, hilt first. "I wish to surrender Fort Griswold to your senior officer."

With Eyre dead it took them a moment to locate Lieutenant Colonel Potter, an officer from the New Jersey Volunteers who'd been fighting on the Loyalist side. "Do you wish to surrender, sir?" he asked Ledyard.

"I do, sir. Here is my sword."

Potter accepted the sword and immediately plunged it into Ledyard's chest.

Swift sprang forward at the sight of it, but a pair of British soldiers held him back. He and the remaining officers were confined to the colonel's quarters, where Emily Ledyard was overcome with grief at the terrible news. They heard shouts and screams from below as Potter instructed his men to finish the job with muskets and bayonets. In the end, almost the entire garrison was dead or wounded. The two captains, two lieutenants, and Swift were the only survivors other than Ledyard's widow, and Colonel Potter announced they would be dealt with personally by General Arnold.

"Is that the man who killed my husband?" Emily Ledyard asked when Potter had left the room.

"It is," Lieutenant Fox confirmed. "I saw it myself and I shall never forget the brutality of the act."

She brooded over that fact for some time, and when she spoke again she said, "I want you to kill him for what he did to William."

"Me?" Fox responded, wide-eyed at the request.

"Any of you. All of you."

Captain Rolph exchanged glances with the others and said, "Any of us would gladly lay down our lives for you, Mrs. Ledyard, but what you are asking is virtually impossible. If any of us were to challenge Colonel Potter to a duel I am certain he would run us through on the spot, as he did your husband."

"I am not suggesting a duel," she told them. "I am suggesting that one of you four, my husband's trusted officers, take revenge for his death by killing Colonel Potter by any means possible."

They exchanged glances again, and this time it was Dunwiddy who spoke. "I am willing to do it."

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"And I!" Captain Rolph agreed. The lieutenants, Fox and Yates, joined in.

Alexander Swift stepped forward. "Not so fast! What you're suggesting will only get you all killed."

"We're dead men anyway," Dunwiddy argued, "as soon as General Arnold gets here."

"Perhaps not. I know Arnold. He can be reasoned with."

But Colonel Ledyard's widow was beyond the point of reasoning. "You four officers may draw straws for the honor of killing him," she announced. "That way none of us will know who actually does the deed." There was a broom standing in a corner of the room, and perhaps that had given her the idea. She went to it at once and pulled out the straws, then broke one of them in half. She arranged them behind her back, like a half-remembered child's game, then held them out to the officers.

"Take one."

"Mrs. Ledyard . . . Emily," Captain Rolph implored her.

"Take one!"

Each of the officers did so, hiding their straws and consulting them in private. "There now," she said with relief. "I expect it should be done tonight. The morning may be too late."

They remained confined for the night in the late colonel's quarters, which consisted of two rooms on the top floor of the fort. Emily slept, or tried to sleep, in the bedroom. Swift and the four officers occupied the outer parlor, with two armed guards just outside the closed door. Colonel Potter, satisfied that the fort was secure, had taken an empty room across the hall.

Swift had expected General Arnold to arrive at the fort that evening, but he'd been busy securing their positions in the town and ordering its destruction. Churches, stores, and private homes were set aflame as the enemy troops ran through the streets with firebrands held high. The courthouse and jail were burned, along with the shipyards and dozens of vessels. At one point Emily called them into her bedroom and they watched from the balcony as New London and the adjoining town of Groton on the east bank were going up in flames. A warehouse stocked with gunpowder exploded and the town was showered with a hail of fire. British ships continued to ride at anchor in the harbor, a sign that the troops probably would be embarking once the destruction was complete.

It was shortly after dawn when Arnold turned his attention to Fort Griswold, coming over with two aides to survey the damage. He had summoned Colonel Potter and while waiting for his arrival Arnold visited the quarters where the officers and Mrs. Ledyard were being held. When he recognized Alexander Swift he was taken aback.

"Swift, can that be you? What are you doing here?"

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"Trying to stay one step ahead of you, General. Are you responsible for the butchery that took place here yesterday?"

"Like all British officers, I have orders to put down the rebellion at any cost. Exactly what are you referring—?"

One of Arnold's aides burst into the room. "General, come quickly! Someone has killed Colonel Potter!"

Even Swift was startled by the news, and his first reaction was that someone else had beaten their man to the task. There was no way one of the four officers could have gotten free to kill Potter. All of them had been confined to the room with him, and he was certain none could have left without his knowledge.

Leaving them under guard, Arnold hurried away with his aide. It was a quarter-hour later when he returned, and now he summoned Swift into an adjoining room. "Tell me what this is all about," the general demanded. "Which one of you killed him?"

"We are prisoners here! If someone killed Colonel Potter it had to be one of his own men."

Arnold opened his clenched fist and dropped a gold button on the table. "This came from an American officer's uniform. I found it near his body."

"There may be other officers—"

"Ledyard and Major Sullivan are both dead, as you know. The button came from one of those four."

Swift continued staring at the button. "How was Colonel Potter killed?"

"Run through with a sword. His men say it's the same one he used to kill Ledyard."

"Yes," Swift agreed, half to himself. "It would be."

"I've seen some of your work in solving crimes of this sort. Your reasoning was quite impressive during our last meeting on board the *Vulture.*"

"Frankly, General, I have no desire to solve the killing of Colonel Potter. Such a man is better off dead."

Arnold smiled unpleasantly. "Then I must offer you an incentive. We sail from here at the high tide, shortly before noon. I will hang the killer of Colonel Potter in the courtyard before we depart. If the killer has not been identified by that time, I will hang all four officers, and you and Mrs. Ledyard along with them."

When he returned to the others, Swift's first action was to examine the uniform coats of the four officers. None of them was missing a button. He explained the situation to them, without urging a confession by the guilty party. The men exchanged glances but said nothing. It was Emily Ledyard, coming out of the bedroom in her robe, who overheard the conversation and joined in.

"Whichever of you performed this heroic act, you have my undying

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gratitude. It is entirely your choice if you wish to admit to the act. If you do not, I am prepared to die with the rest of you."

Captain Rolph took the lead in the discussion. "One of us is guilty and only one of us should be punished if it comes to that. Why should six people die instead of one?"

"Do we really believe Arnold would release the other five?" Fox countered. "We are all doomed no matter what happens."

"He might let Mrs. Ledyard and Mr. Swift go," Dunwiddy reasoned. "They are noncombatants."

But Swift shook his head. "Mrs. Ledyard perhaps, but not me. Arnold knows me to be an agent of General Washington."

"We have a bigger problem here," Lieutenant Yates pointed out. "We were under guard all night. How could any of us have left this room to kill Potter?"

Alexander Swift nodded. "I've already considered that. We have chamber pots in the rooms so no one was allowed to leave for any purpose. Mrs. Ledyard's bedroom opens only onto this room. As for myself, I was awake much of the night and was not aware of anyone leaving. Certainly the guards at the door would have prevented it."

"What will you do?" Emily asked him. "There's so little time."

"I'll see if I can examine the room where it happened. If someone else killed him they might have left a clue other than this gold button."

General Arnold, busy deciding what loot from the town could be taken with them, paid scant attention to his request, directing an officer to escort him to the room. In Arnold's eyes, Alexander Swift was already a dead man. A tall, lean officer, Captain Smithfield, took him to the room where Colonel Potter's body still lay sprawled among the blood-soaked sheets. It was across the hall from Emily Ledyard's room and a duplicate of it, reached only through an outer room whose door would have been opposite their own.

"The two guards at your door had a perfect view of the only entrance," Smithfield told him. "They swear no one entered or left either room."

"Tell that to General Arnold." He lifted a corner of the sheet and peered beneath it. "What happened to the sword?"

"The general took it."

Swift walked out on the balcony and looked down at the harbor. Redcoat soldiers were carrying loot from the burning town down to their boats. Soon they would be gone. He turned back to the room. There was nothing here, no clue as to which of the four officers had drawn the short straw. "Will this fort be destroyed too?"

"I believe so. A cannon has been brought up to fire at the walls."

Swift returned to the room where the others waited. Emily had gone into the bedroom to dress. Fox was nervously pacing the floor while Yates and Rolph played a card game. When he told them

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he'd come up with nothing, it was Captain Dunwiddy who spoke. "I will tell them I killed Major Potter."

"Did you?"

"No, but then at least there's a chance for the rest of you. I would have killed him, if I'd drawn the short straw."

"There's no chance for us," Yates argued. "Our only way out is if we can work together and overpower the guards."

Swift had been considering the same possibility. But with his scheme they would need the help of Ledyard's widow. The door to the bedroom was closed and he knocked gently on it. "Come in," she said.

Emily was dressed in black for mourning. She was tying a bow at her neck as he entered. "If they're going to hang me they can hang me like this," she told him.

"I don't want anyone to hang. There might be a way for us to escape. It's a long chance but I think it may be worth a try."

"Tell me."

"You hide in the closet. I'll go out and tell the guards you've jumped from the balcony. When they come running in to see, we'll overpower them or push them off. If there aren't too many other guards downstairs we might have a fighting chance."

"All right," she quickly agreed. "I'll do it."

He outlined his plan to the four officers. "Any action seems better than nothing," Yates said. "I've been in favor of fighting right along. Let's give it a try."

When he was sure Emily was well hidden he opened the door. "Come quickly," he told the soldiers. "Mrs. Ledyard has jumped from the balcony!"

The first guard rushed in, but the second one remained in the doorway with his musket covering them. Swift was unable to follow the first man into the bedroom. Then they heard a shout and a scream as the first guard went off the balcony, and he knew Emily Ledyard had done their work for them. She appeared in the doorway, magnificent in her black gown, and the second guard shot her through the heart.

They could waste no more time. Captain Rolph flattened the guard with his fist before he could reload, and Swift paused only to be certain Emily was dead. Then he followed the others down the stone steps and out of the fort. Three guards on duty near the entrance had run over to examine the body of their fallen comrade, and by the time they spotted the fleeing Americans it was too late. Only one managed to get off a shot, high of its mark. Then Swift's party was into the woods east of the fort.

"Keep running," he urged the men. "If they decide to come after us we could still be in trouble."

Soon they worked their way back toward the shore and found a

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spot where they could observe the British ships. Already, boats full of redcoats were heading back, and other troops lined the beaches. General Arnold's raid was over, and they were safe.

They remained hidden until all the ships had sailed, then returned to the smoldering town to do what they could for the survivors. It was some time later, toward the end of the day, when Lieutenant Fox thought to ask, "Which one of us killed the Colonel? Who drew the short straw?"

The four men looked at each other and then at Alexander Swift. He had the answer for them. "There was no short straw. Emily Ledyard herself murdered the man who killed her husband."

"How is that possible?" Yates asked. "There was no way out of her room except through the parlor where the five of us were being held, and past a door with two armed guards."

"She didn't pass through our room," Swift explained. "She passed over it. At dinner two nights ago she mentioned that she and her husband went rock climbing in Vermont. We were on the top floor with a balcony outside her room. The room across the hall where we knew Colonel Potter slept was identical. A rock climber would have no trouble boosting herself from the balcony railing to the fort's battlements, and down again on the other side."

"But we drew straws!" Dunwiddy protested.

"Emily did that simply to shift suspicion from herself. She knew none of you could get out to kill Potter during the night, so she kept the short straw herself and presented you with four identical straws from which to draw. It couldn't have been anyone else, really. She dropped that gold uniform button to implicate one of you, perhaps planning to pull one off a jacket if given the chance. But when none of your buttons was missing I knew it could only have come from one of her husband's uniforms, which would have been there in the bedroom closet."

"She was a brave woman," Captain Rolph said. "We owe her our freedom, our lives."

Benedict Arnold's raid on New London was the last battle of the war in the north. It did not deter Washington from his march to Virginia, where he trapped Cornwallis at Yorktown. Just six weeks after New London, Cornwallis laid down his arms and surrendered an army of seven thousand British troops. Perhaps he had heard about Colonel Ledyard's sword. When the moment came to surrender his own sword to General Washington, Cornwallis pleaded illness and sent an aide with the sword instead. It was accepted and then immediately returned.

Although the official treaty of independence was still two years off, the American Revolution had ended. Somehow, though, Alexander Swift felt he had not yet seen the end of Benedict Arnold. ●

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2000 EQMM Readers Award Ballot

The first year of the new millenium is complete for *EQMM* and with fears of millenial disasters behind us—we didn't print any pages upside down or misspell the name of a renowned mystery writer such as Agatha Christie (freak mishaps of previous decades)—we can relax and look back at the stories we published in this milestone year.

Nearly every reader's enjoyment of a work of fiction is enhanced by the knowledge that others have been struck by it, too. You only have to listen to conversations among fans at a mystery convention to see that sharing one's discovery of a clever plot or pleasing turn of phrase or appealing character is nearly as rewarding as coming across these literary excellences in the first place. Now is the time for you to share your impressions of *EQMM*'s fiction offerings for 2000 with our staff, through your Readers Award ballot. Naturally, we hope to hear that you were as captivated by the work of the accomplished authors from whom we purchased stories as we were. But if there are instances in which you failed to share our enthusiasm, we want to know that, too—so don't feel shy about scribbling notes alongside your Readers Award choices or in the ballot's margins.

The existence of the *EQMM* Readers Award is a token of our confidence in our readers. Only a magazine with a long-term, stable reader base can successfully foster a competition such as this. Since most of *EQMM*'s readers are regular subscribers, not people who pick up a copy occasionally in a bookstore or at the newsstand, the votes cast for the Readers Award usually represent bona fide assessments of what is best of *all* that is published in a given year. Unlike the voters eligible to cast ballots for the mystery field's several fan awards, *EQMM* voters most often have in their possession copies of every piece of fiction in the running for the award, for on their bookshelves sit copies of all the year's magazines, which they collect and keep for future re-reading.

If you see yourself in this description, do, please, take the time to look over your copies of the year's issues and cast votes for the three tales you found most memorable. The rules for 2000 are as follows: Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two, if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes

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received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner.

Please refresh your memory of the year's selections by referring to the index on pages 140-142 before marking your entries. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address below, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

The 2000 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 2001 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-sized stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 2000 *EQMM* Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Mail to: **The Editors**
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016

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English Autumn —American Fall

by Minette Walters

With only six mystery novels so far in print (and a seventh on the way), Minette Walters has already claimed a pre-eminent place in the ranks of mystery writers. She is the recipient of three of the field's highest honors: the Edgar Allan Poe Award, the Gold Dagger, and the John Creasy Award. Ms. Walters has so far produced only two short stories, this being the second of them. Fans won't want to miss her latest novel from Putnam, *The Breaker* (1999). ✝

I remember thinking that Mrs. Newberg's problem was not so much her husband's chronic addiction to alcohol as her dreary pretense that he was a man of moderation. They were a handsome couple, tall and slender with sweeps of snow-white hair, always expensively dressed in cashmere and tweeds. In fairness to her, he didn't look like a drunk or, indeed, behave like one, but I cannot recall a single occasion in the two weeks I knew them when he was sober. His wife excused him with clichés. She hinted at insomnia, a death in the family, even a gammy leg—a legacy of war, naturally—which made walking difficult. Once in a while an amused smile would cross his face as if something she'd said had tickled his sense of humour, but most of the time he sat staring at a fixed point in front of him, afraid of losing his precarious equilibrium.

I guessed they were in their late seventies, and I wondered what had brought them so far from home in the middle of a cold English autumn. Mrs. Newberg was evasive. Just a little holiday, she trilled in her birdlike voice with its hint of Northern Europe in the hard edge she gave to her consonants. She cast nervous glances towards her husband as she spoke, as if daring him to disagree. It may have been true, but an empty seaside hotel in a blustery Lincolnshire resort in October seemed an unlikely choice for two

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elderly Americans. She knew I didn't believe her, but she was too canny to explain further. Perhaps she understood that my willingness to talk to her depended on a lingering curiosity.

"It was Mr. Newberg who wanted to come," she said sotto voce, as if that settled the matter.

It was an unfashionable resort out of season, and Mrs. Newberg was clearly lonely. Who wouldn't be with only an uncommunicative drunk for company? On odd evenings a rep would put in a brief appearance in the dining room in order to fuel his stomach in silence before retiring to bed, but for the most part conversations with me were her single source of entertainment. In a desultory fashion, we became friends. Of course, she wanted to know why I was there, but I, too, could be evasive. Looking for somewhere to live, I told her.

"How nice," she said, not meaning it. "But do you want to be so far from London?" It was a reproach. For her, as for so many, capital cities were synonymous with life.

"I don't like noise," I confessed.

She looked towards the window where rain was pounding furiously against the panes. "Perhaps it's people you don't like," she suggested.

I demurred out of politeness.

"I don't have a problem with individuals," I said, casting a thoughtful glance in Mr. Newberg's direction, "just humanity en masse."

"Yes," she agreed vaguely. "I think I prefer animals as well."

She had a habit of using non sequiturs, and I did wonder once or twice if she wasn't quite "with it." But if that were the case, I thought, how on earth had they found their way to this remote place when Mr. Newberg had trouble negotiating the tables in the bar? The answer was straightforward enough. The hotel had sent a car to collect them from the airport.

"Wasn't that very expensive?" I asked.

"It was free," said Mrs. Newberg with dignity. "A courtesy. The manager came himself."

She tut-tutted at my look of astonishment. "It's what we expect when we pay full rate for a room."

"I'm paying full rate," I said.

"I doubt it," she said, her bosom rising on a sigh. "Americans get stung wherever they go."

During the first week of their stay, I saw them only once outside the confines of the hotel. I came across them on the beach, wrapped up in heavy coats and woollen scarves and sitting in deck chairs, staring out over a turbulent sea which laboured beneath the whip of a bitter east wind from Siberia. I expressed surprise to

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see them, and Mrs. Newberg, who assumed for some reason that my surprise was centred on the deck chairs, said the hotel would supply anything for a small sum.

"Do you come here every morning?" I asked her.

She nodded. "It reminds us of home."

"I thought you lived in Florida."

"Yes," she said cautiously, as if trying to remember how much she'd already divulged.

Mr. Newberg and I exchanged conspiratorial smiles. He spoke rarely but when he did it was always with irony. "Florida is famous for its hurricanes," he told me before turning his face to the freezing wind.

After that I avoided the beach for fear of becoming even more entangled with them. It's not that I disliked them. As a matter of fact, I quite enjoyed their company. They were the least inquisitive couple I had ever met, and there was never any problem with the long silences that developed between us. But I had no wish to spend the daylight hours being sociable with strangers.

Mrs. Newberg remarked on it one evening. "I wonder you didn't go to Scotland," she said. "I'm told you can walk for miles in Scotland without ever seeing a soul."

"I couldn't live in Scotland," I said.

"Ah, yes. I'd forgotten." Was she being snide or was I imagining it? "You're looking for a house."

"Somewhere to live," I corrected her.

"An apartment then. Does it matter?"

"I think so."

Mr. Newberg stared into his whisky glass. "Das Geheimniß, um die größte Fruchtbarkeit und den größten Genuß vom Dasein einzuernten, heißt: gefahrlich leben," he murmured in fluent German. " 'The secret of reaping the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment from life is to live dangerously.' Friedrich Nietzsche."

"Does it work?" I asked.

I watched him smile secretly to himself. "Only if you shed blood."

"I'm sorry?"

But his eyes were awash with alcohol and he didn't answer.

"He's tired," said his wife. "He's had a long day."

We lapsed into silence and I watched Mrs. Newberg's face smooth from sharp anxiety to its more natural expression of resigned acceptance of the cards fate had dealt her. It was a good five minutes before she offered an explanation.

"He enjoyed the war," she told me in an undertone. "So many men did."

"It's the camaraderie," I agreed, remembering how my mother

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had always talked fondly about the war years. "Adversity brings out the best in people."

"Or the worst," she said, watching Mr. Newberg top up his glass from the litre bottle of whisky which was replaced, new, every evening on their table. "I guess it depends which side you're on."

"You mean it's better to win?"

"I expect it helps," she said absent-mindedly.

The next day Mrs. Newberg appeared at breakfast with a black eye. She claimed she had fallen out of bed and knocked her face on the bedside cabinet. There was no reason to doubt her except that her husband kept massaging the knuckles of his right hand. She looked wan and depressed, and I invited her to come walking with me.

"I'm sure Mr. Newberg can amuse himself for an hour or two," I said, looking at him disapprovingly.

We wandered down the esplanade, watching seagulls whirl across the sky like windblown fabric. Mrs. Newberg insisted on wearing dark glasses, which gave her the look of a blind woman. She walked slowly, pausing regularly to catch her breath, so I offered her my arm and she leaned on it heavily. For the first time I thought of her as old.

"You shouldn't let your husband hit you," I said.

She gave a small laugh but said nothing.

"You should report him."

"To whom?"

"The police."

She drew away to lean on the railings above the beach. "And then what? A prosecution? Prison?"

I leant beside her. "More likely a court would order him to address his behaviour."

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"He might have a different perspective on things if he were sober."

"He drinks to forget," she said, looking across the sea towards the far-off shores of Northern Europe.

I turned a cold shoulder towards Mr. Newberg from then on. I don't approve of men who knock their wives about. It made little difference to our relationship. If anything, sympathy for Mrs. Newberg strengthened the bonds between the three of us. I took to escorting them to their room of an evening and pointing out in no uncertain terms that I took a personal interest in Mrs. Newberg's well-being. Mr. Newberg seemed to find my solicitude amusing. "She has no conscience to trouble her," he said on one occasion. And on another: "I have more to fear than she has."

During the second week, he tripped at the top of the stairs on his way to breakfast and was dead by the time he reached the bottom.

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There were no witnesses to the accident, although a waitress, hearing the crash of the falling body, rushed out of the dining room to find the handsome old man sprawled on his back at the foot of the stairs with his eyes wide open and a smile on his face. No one was particularly surprised, although, as the manager said, it was odd that it should happen in the morning when he was at his most sober. Some hours later a policeman came to ask questions, not because there was any suggestion of foul play but because Mr. Newberg was a foreign national and reports needed to be written.

I sat with Mrs. Newberg in her bedroom while she dabbed gently at her tears and explained to the officer that she had been sitting at her dressing table and putting the finishing touches to her makeup when Mr. Newberg left the room to go downstairs. "He always went first," she said. "He liked his coffee fresh."

The policeman nodded as if her remark made sense, then inquired tactfully about her husband's drinking habits. A sample of Mr. Newberg's blood had shown a high concentration of alcohol, he told her. She smiled faintly and said she couldn't believe Mr. Newberg's moderate consumption of whisky had anything to do with his fall. There was no elevator in the hotel, she pointed out, and he had had a bad leg for years. "Americans aren't used to stairs," she said, as if that were explanation enough.

He gave up and turned to me instead. He understood I was a friend of the couple. Was there anything I could add that might throw some light on the accident? I avoided looking at Mrs. Newberg, who had skillfully obscured the faded bruise around her eye with foundation. "Not really," I said, wondering why I'd never noticed the scar above her cheek that looked as if it might have been made by the sharp corner of a bedside cabinet. "He told me once that the secret of fulfillment is to live dangerously, so perhaps he didn't take as much care of himself as he should have done."

He flicked an embarrassed glance in Mrs. Newberg's direction. "Meaning he drank too much?"

I gave a small shrug which he took for agreement. I might have pointed out that Mr. Newberg's carelessness lay in his failure to look over his shoulder, but I couldn't see what it would achieve. No one doubted his wife had been in their room at the time.

She bowed graciously as the officer took his leave. "Are English policemen always so charming?" she asked, moving to the dressing table to dust her lovely face with powder.

"Always," I assured her, "as long as they have no reason to suspect you of anything."

Her reflection looked at me for a moment. "What's to suspect?" she asked. ●

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For Richard or For Poorer

by William Bankier

After a year in Baytown, Lucy Beringer still felt the shame of being left at the altar in Montreal. The telegram was delivered to the church while she was waiting in the vestry with her maid of honor, and the organ was playing "Because" over and over again. Jerome explained, in ten words or less, that a change of heart was sending him, alas, to a construction job in Alaska. Lucy caught the triumphant smile that flickered across her best friend's face.

At age thirty-eight, seen by all as an old maid, she had played her marriage to the hilt. She could not face these people, fallen back into the spinster life. There was only one course of action open to the distressed woman: quit her job, cancel her lease, and leave town.

Through her connections at the radio station where she worked, she was able to go directly to a similar job at CBAY in Baytown, as receptionist and secretary to the manager. The work was familiar and not as hectic as at the metropolitan station. Lucy fit right in.

Surprisingly, before the first year was out, she found herself reconsidering marriage—something she had promised herself she would never do again. And there were two men on her mind this time instead of just one.

Blame it on Richard Flam. One of the wealthiest men in town, the forty-something businessman was a glamorous figure, limping

William Bankier is one of this magazine's all-time most prolific contributors. While we haven't made an exact count, we reckon he's reached at least the 150 mark in number of stories published in these pages, putting him behind only Edward D. Hoch among writers currently sending us material. The primary reason for Mr. Bankier's success with *EQMM*'s editors and readers is his unique voice. There's a hint of melancholy in it, but a lyrical quality, too. †

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along Front Street on the way to his sporting-goods store. There was a newer Flam's at the Riverside Mall and a third in Centralia, sixty miles away.

Flam advertised on CBAY. "Who's the new girl in town?" he demanded of Lucy's boss on their first encounter several months ago. His voice was all gridiron, ballpark, and gym. His pirate hair was silver and he pinned her with his blue-eyed, shifting gaze as he leaned his weight on his cane, close up against her desk. Hearing she was from Montreal, he exploded with enthusiasm.

"Desjardins! Rockhead's Paradise! Ben's for a smoked meat sandwich! I love that town!"

Sensing the encouragement flowing from her boss, Lucy found herself agreeing to a dinner date with the millionaire former local sports hero. He picked her up two days later in his Corvette and drove thirty miles north to The Cedars. Two drinks acted on Flam like truth serum. Lucy was a good listener.

"You're wondering about the cane. You might think it was an old sports injury. I played football for Queen's University and yes, I did bang up a knee in a game against Western. But this was something else. I got shot. In Las Vegas, seven years ago. In the parking lot outside Caesar's Palace. Two guys at a poker table objected to some things I said while I was taking their money. They followed me outside and when I decked one of them, the other pulled a gun. Kneecapped me, the bastard did." Flam laughed. "I might as well be living in Belfast."

Over the grilled salmon, he began talking about his former marriages, three of them. "The first one divorced me," he summarized. "The second one ran away. The third killed herself." This recollection put a dreamy look in his eyes as he paused, wine glass halfway between lip and linen. Then he recovered himself and gave his overwhelmed companion a wink. "Lucky Richard, they call me."

Two days later, she was talking to Oswald Raines, the man she really cared about. The hopeless one with no money. But his late mother's house was nice; with cleaning up and some paint and new carpets and curtains, it could become a dandy little cottage for two.

"Richard Flam has asked me to marry him."

"Lucky you." Oswald was sitting at the keyboard of his computer, looking at his page on the Internet. What little money he made came from selling the poems he wrote and displayed on his Web page for all the world to see. Oswald Raines was a pretty good poet. The local citizenry, familiar with the work of the serious little man in his clapboard cottage, often referred to him as Baytown's poet laureate.

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"I'd rather you and I got married," Lucy said. "Like we discussed."

"Without money, two can live as grimly as one," Oswald replied, tapping keys, watching a line of words materialize on the pale screen.

"I've been thinking about that."

"So have I. It shames me to say it again. I'm not a provider."

"But just supposing. Let's say I accept Richard's proposal. We get married. Then, a short time later, he falls down the stairs and dies. Most accidents occur in the home."

"So do many murders."

Lucy decided to let the idea rest for the time being. She was becoming determined to settle into a life of wedded bliss with Oswald Raines. He was such easy company. At forty years of age, he was still a boy.

But she could never be poor again. When she was growing up in the Verdun district of Montreal, the Beringer family had experienced serious poverty. Her father worked only when he was sober, which was not often. Her mother took care of house and kids and accepted money from male strangers who came and went. Lucy went to work as soon as she finished high school. This made things better, especially when she landed the job at the radio station.

If Richard Flam died in an accident—and she was sure she could arrange it—then she would become a wealthy widow. After a suitable period of mourning, she could sell the Flam mansion and move in here with Oswald. Redecorate the cottage; do some minor alterations on the poet laureate.

"What are you writing?"

"It's a parody of a famous poem we read in high school called 'Jenny Kissed Me.'"

"Can I hear it?"

"Why not? It's about you." Oswald began to recite, reading from the screen.

"Lucy touched me when we met,
Put her hand upon my shoulder,
Warming this poor poet's heart,
While my childhood dreams grew colder.
Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,
Say the grip of fear has clutched me.
Say I'm too naive, but add . . .
Lucy touched me."

The wedding took place in April. Pleading shyness, Lucy persuaded Richard to elope. They flew to Las Vegas and were married in one of the roadside chapels. Then, they spent their honeymoon in the casinos, with the groom bellowing clichés at a dice table

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while his bride roamed the avenues of slot machines with her plastic tub of coins.

There were dollar slots and quarter slots, but despite the fact that Richard had given her plenty of money, she could bring herself only to play the nickel machines. One night she hit a jackpot. Her husband came by as the hokey music was playing and coins were clattering down into the metal receptacle.

"What are you doing playing nickels?" he spouted. "If this was dollars you'd have something. You'll end up with eighty bucks. You klutz!" He limped away, disgusted.

It was not the worst of the insults which he seemed incapable of editing out of his conversation. Lucy understood as the marriage progressed through its early months why wife number one had divorced him, wife number two had left him, and poor number three had chosen to end her own life.

Not Lucy. There was another reason now to knock off this belligerent boor, along with her goal of bringing wealth to a better life with Oswald Raines. It was the best reason of all. Richard Flam did not deserve to be on the planet. He belonged in a premature grave. Lucy Beringer was going to put him in it as soon as she finalized her plan.

Simple is best.

There was a spectacular staircase in the Flam mansion, rising from a spacious reception hall inside the oak front door. Lucy's husband referred to it as his daily challenge as he made the ascent to bed, hand on banister, game leg slung upwards with his free hand grasping the pant leg. It should be an easy matter, some day soon, to give him a send-off on the top landing so that his descent, head over heels, would occur all in one burst of fatal action.

On the assigned morning, Lucy was up early. She began her days at sunrise, eager to escape the conjugal bed. "Lordy," she used to tell herself, "I'm earning every dollar of this man's estate."

"Where are you off to?" he growled as she was leaving the room.

"I've got things to attend to around the house."

"Leave it for Martha." Martha was the housekeeper who came in five days a week, ten o'clock until four. Richard rose at nine. There would be plenty of time to do the deed before ten.

"I like to keep busy," Lucy said.

"Well, pick up your feet, you dumb ox. You woke me up."

Lucy made herself coffee and toast in the kitchen and watched the sun come up through the trees in the park that surrounded three sides of the house. She was good at controlling her thought processes. She was able to put away the murder plan scheduled for later that morning. In its place, she dreamed of her dear

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Oswald and the joy they would experience in his forlorn cottage made grand with Richard's money.

At eight o'clock, Lucy went back upstairs to the trophy room. This paneled salon was fitted with cabinets that contained dozens of silver cups and statuettes awarded the former athlete in his years as football player, golfer, swimmer, and local track star. In a lower drawer was a tin of silver polish with a pile of clean rags. Lucy took out what she needed, selected several trophies, placed everything on newspapers spread open on a table near the window, and went to work.

She left the door open so she would hear her husband when he approached the stairway.

At nine on the nose, he left the bed and went into an adjoining bathroom. There, he indulged in his morning ritual of loosening the phlegm in his bronchial passages and spitting it into the sink. Those sounds alone, extending over several minutes, were justification enough for the execution that was about to take place.

When he arrived at the head of the stairs, Lucy hurried from the trophy room. "Whoa," he said. "Where did you come from?"

"I'm polishing the silver." She showed him a gleaming chalice.

"I thought I was in the movie *Psycho.* Where Tony Perkins, in his wig, wheels out of that bedroom and stabs poor Martin Balsam." He reached for the banister.

Lucy set the silver cup on the carpet. Taking a position behind Richard, she balanced on one leg and drove her other foot, hard, into the small of his back. The result was rewarding. With one brief shout, he dove forward and began a series of somersaults down the long stairway, head, shoulders, hips, elbows, not missing a single step on the way down, as far as Lucy could judge.

When he reached the marble floor at the bottom, he lay sprawled on his face. She hurried down to kneel beside him. "Good Lord, Richard, what happened?"

He did not move, which was good. But he groaned, which was bad. He was not dead, though he was certainly racked up. The idea of inheriting not wealth, but a suspicious, bed-ridden spouse to look after, filled Lucy Beringer with waves of anger and strength. She got to her feet, bent over, and seized the semi-conscious man by his shirt collar and the seat of his pants.

"Come on, you!" she snarled.

Then, as if she was a bouncer ejecting a drunken customer from a bar, she dragged Richard to his feet and began thrusting his body ahead of her up the stairs. His limbs flopped like a marionette. She cursed and spat throughout the angry ascension, finally reaching the upper landing.

There, she turned him around, once again facing downwards.

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His head lolled sideways, puzzled blue eyes trying to focus on hers. "Whaaa?" he said.

"All right now, Richard," she gasped. "Let's try it again. And this time, damn you, get it right!"

Chief Greb himself drove up from the police station on the market square, along with the duty constable. Accidental death in the Flam mansion demanded his personal attention. He looked at the corpse. He listened to the weeping widow's story. They went upstairs to the landing where the accident began.

Lucy picked up the silver chalice from the carpet. "I was polishing silver in the trophy room. I heard him fall and I ran out here with this in my hands. He was lying on the floor. There were no signs of life. Thank goodness he didn't suffer."

Chief Greb made arrangements with the coroner. He attended the autopsy. He took possession of the deceased's clothing in a box which he stowed in the trunk of his car for return to Lucy Beringer Flam when next he visited the house.

"There's a woman who's struck it rich," he said to himself. "Rolls in here from Montreal, marries Richard Flam, and bingo! Before you can say luck of the Irish, she inherits the estate."

At first, Lucy played it straight. After the funeral, she received friends and neighbours on a continuous basis for a few weeks. When this contact tailed off, as it does, she remained in the house most of every day. Chief Greb called about the clothes Richard had been wearing; she said she didn't want them. Martha came and went on her housekeeping duties, leaving the widow free to watch television in her bedroom and make telephone calls to Oswald Raines.

"I have to lie low for a while," she told him. "But soon I'll be able to come and see you."

"It's all happened as you said."

"Wife number four was too smart for him. And too quick. He had it coming. I'm happy to be the one who paid him off."

Like so many people in the modern world, Chief Greb had a new hobby. Almost every evening, he sat in front of his personal computer and "surfed the Internet." This gave him access to information and ideas from individuals all over Canada and the United States. One of the Web pages he often visited was that of Baytown's poet laureate, Oswald Raines. Oswald frequently displayed his latest poem. He also advertised his self-published slim volumes of verse, sales of which provided most of his meagre income.

On this night there was, indeed, a new sonnet on the screen. The chief adjusted his glasses and read it with interest.

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How Great The Fall
by
Oswald Raines

The grip of fear holds some men very tight.
They may pretend to be as bold as thieves,
But panic comes to grab them in the night,
And settles in their bones and never leaves.

If such a man displays an angry face,
And treats his wife with much hostility,
'Tis likely that his aim is to displace
His fear, and set imprisoned feelings free.

A man I know was married many times
And cursed these women with his every breath.
His latest wife, quite free of former crimes,
Has turned on him and put the man to death.

She loves me now, as I put fears aside
And wonder, will this killer be my bride?

The police chief sat looking at the words on his computer screen with a thoughtful expression on his face. Then he switched on the printer and made a couple of copies of Oswald Raines's poem on crisp white paper.

Lucy dressed herself in black and went to visit Oswald. He broke open a tin of biscuits, gave them ten minutes in the oven, then brought them to the table with butter and jam and a pot of tea. Everything was sociable and cosy, but Lucy sensed a change in Oswald.

"Are you all right?"

"Fair to middling."

"I'm top of the world."

"You look intense."

"I'm trying to figure you out."

Oswald opened a hot biscuit, added butter and jam, destroyed half of it with a bite. Through a full mouth he managed to say, "Chief Greb came to see me."

Lucy felt the chill. "What for?"

"He saw my latest poem on the Internet. He'd downloaded it. He had the hard copy with him."

"What poem?"

"This one." He left the room and came back with a printed sheet.

Lucy read the sonnet. "Why did you do this?"

"I write about my life. I do it all the time."

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She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I killed Richard so we could be together. You produced this to satisfy your puny little ego." She left the table, left the room, calling as she opened the front door, "I'd better put out this fire. If it's not too late. Let's both think about what happens with us."

Chief Greb stood in his office in the station house across from the arena. When his visitor was seated, he settled himself behind his desk. The widow Flam looked beautiful in black. So do spiders, if you like legs.

"Oswald Raines says you came to see him."

"About his poem. The one concerning a woman who murders her much-married husband."

"His poems are fantasies."

"With a core of truth."

"Enough to convince a jury?"

"Not by itself. But he told me you mentioned the plan to him. Kill the abusive Flam, get rich, then settle down with the peaceful poet."

"His word against mine, Chief."

"True." Greb got up and approached a side table upon which rested a cardboard box. He reached inside it, finding a pair of trousers and a shirt. Lucy recognized the garments and her heart skipped a beat.

"Been to a garage sale?"

"These are the clothes Richard Flam was wearing when he died. The coroner passed them on to me. I offered them to you and you didn't want them back. You should have accepted them. You should have burned them."

"That's all they're good for."

"No. They are the evidence that will prove you murdered your husband. See, here on the seat of the pants? On the collar of the shirt? Faint traces of a certain substance? I've had it checked out. Silver polish."

Lucy said nothing. There was a flat, bitter taste in her mouth.

"You told me you were polishing silver when you heard your husband fall. I'll tell you what happened. You pushed him down the stairs. You wanted him dead. When you saw he was still alive, you dragged him back to the top and sent him down again."

Faced with incontrovertible evidence of her crime, the desperate woman did the only thing she could. She told the truth. "He ruined the lives of three women. One of them took her own life. He was starting in on me. I did what I had to do."

"That's debatable," the chief responded. "You could have left him." The face he showed her was sympathetic. "Lucy, I know what you're saying. But if we killed all the wicked rascals, who'd be left to run Baytown?" ●

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Art by MArk Evan Walker

THE PRANK

by Robin Hathaway

"I can't believe it!" Mrs. Doyle moaned. "He was sitting right there," she pointed to the chair next to her desk, "telling me one of his ghoulish graveyard stories, less than a week ago. And I heard you give him a clean bill of health, Doctor," she added accusingly.

Dr. Fenimore's nurse was openly grieving for a favorite patient who had passed away the night before. Joe Grady was caretaker at the Spruce Hill Cemetery, one of the oldest cemeteries in Philadelphia. Its proud monuments still overlooked the Schuylkill River, and when it first opened, in 1835, Philadelphians flocked there with their families to picnic among the tombstones. People were on friendlier terms with the dead in those days.

"Not 'a clean bill of health,' Mrs. Doyle," Fenimore reproved his nurse. "Mr. Grady had suffered from a serious heart condition for years. But his condition was stable, and I must admit this sudden attack surprised me."

Horatio yanked off his earphones. "What's up?" The Hispanic teenager had been engrossed in his filing and the noise that he

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called music, but Mrs. Doyle's dramatic gestures had alerted him that something was wrong. The old bird looked as if she was about to cry.

"Joe Grady passed away last night," Fenimore said gravely. "Remember, he was here about a week ago?"

"Oh, yeah." Horatio was silent, thinking. He was a nice old dude. He could tell a story that would scare the shit out of you. "What'd he die of?"

"Heart failure," Fenimore said.

"You mean—just like that?" The boy snapped his fingers.

"No one was there. We don't know how long it took. But we hope he went quickly."

"It's a wonder he didn't go sooner with that wife of his," Mrs. Doyle said. "She would have sent me to my grave years ago." To relieve her feelings, she began typing energetically.

"Yes, Mary Grady was difficult," Fenimore admitted. "Nagged him day and night. That's why he spent so much time at the cemetery, he once told me."

"Poor man." Mrs. Doyle shook her head and treated her keys to another loud tattoo.

"Who found him?" Horatio asked.

"His secretary—early this morning."

"Could they place the time of death?" Mrs. Doyle's fingers hung suspended.

"Approximately midnight," Fenimore said.

Horatio looked at him sharply. "Last night was Mischief Night," he said.

"That's right. And today's Halloween."

"And where were *you* last night?" Mrs. Doyle looked sharply at the boy.

"Not in some graveyard," the boy snapped. "My Mom won't let us out on Mischief Night," he said mournfully. "Or any other night," he added, sighing. Horatio's home was a public-housing project where danger lurked every night of the year.

(Mrs. Doyle's ideas of Mischief Night were dated. They consisted of sticking pins in doorbells or pouring molasses on porch steps. The modern idea of mischief, i.e. burning down a building or pouring kerosene over a homeless person, had escaped her.)

"What does Mischief Night have to do with poor Mr. Grady's

Robin Hathaway's first novel, *The Doctor Digs a Grave,* won the St. Martin's/Malice Domestic prize for Best First Traditional Mystery of 1997 and the Agatha Award for Best First Novel of 1998. The hero of the book, Philadelphia doctor Andrew Fenimore, is modeled on the author's husband. Fenimore is in fine form in this new story; if you like it, you may want to try *The Doctor Makes a Dollhouse Call* (St. Martin's/2000).

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death?" she asked.

"Nothing . . . I suppose." Fenimore looked thoughtful.

Mrs. Doyle's antenna shot up. "You don't suppose he could have been frightened . . .?"

Fenimore looked wary. His nurse had a habit of jumping to hasty conclusions. Excusing himself, the doctor disappeared into his private office. Reluctantly, his employees returned to their work.

Horatio had barely filed two patient's charts and Mrs. Doyle had hardly typed one Medicare form before Dr. Fenimore re-emerged wearing his hat and coat.

"And where are you off to?" Mrs. Doyle knew he had already made his hospital rounds.

"Thought I'd pay my respects to Great-Aunt Matilda," he said.

"She wouldn't happen to be buried at Spruce Hill?" his nurse asked.

"Well . . . as a matter of fact . . ." He looked sheepish. "Come on, Rat." He used Horatio's preferred nickname. "If you've never seen this place, Halloween's a good time for it."

The boy grabbed his jacket with one hand and reached for his Walkman with the other.

Fenimore relieved him of the Walkman. "You won't need that," he said. "I might want to talk to you."

Mrs. Doyle smiled as she watched them hurry out.

The brilliance of the leaves had peaked along Kelly Drive and many had fallen. The Schuylkill was a smooth blue on this cloudless day. A shell, propelled by a single oarsman, glided under a stone arch of the old Pennsylvania Railroad Bridge—much as it had years ago, when Thomas Eakins had painted the scene.

"Where is this graveyard?" Horatio leaned forward to fiddle with the radio knobs.

Fenimore put out a restraining hand. "Let's have a little peace and quiet this morning—in respect for the dead."

The boy dropped his hand in his lap and stared out the window.

"To answer your question, the cemetery is right around the next bend."

They paused at the only light on Kelly Drive, made a sharp right, and drove up a hill. On their left, behind a wrought-iron fence, were the monuments. Some looked like little houses, Horatio noticed, complete with doors and windows. Others were plain stone slabs. Still others were decorated with cupids and angels that looked like they were about to take off. Horatio endowed the scene with his highest compliment. "Cool," he said.

Fenimore stopped in front of a pair of wrought-iron gates. Elegant once, now they were rusted and in need of paint. Once inside, Fenimore parked and led his companion to a decrepit building.

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The door bore a yellowed sign: OFFICE. As they entered, a musty odor greeted them. A large map of the cemetery hung on one wall. Under it stood a row of battered filing cabinets. A wooden counter, marred by pits and scars, separated them from a woman typing. She glanced up when they came in. Her face bore signs of weeping. Drawing a tissue from a box on her desk, she blew her nose. "Sorry," she said, attempting a smile. "May I help you?"

"I'm Dr. Fenimore. Mr. Grady's physician. And this is my assistant, Horatio."

The woman seemed overwhelmed by her unexpected visitors. "I'm afraid I'm not myself today." She sniffed. "The office is so empty without . . ." Her shoulders heaved.

Fenimore would have put a comforting arm around her if the counter had not been in the way. Horatio glided over to the map on the wall and became deeply engrossed in the location of cemetery lots.

"I should have gone home," the woman said. "But sometimes people come great distances to visit their relatives and I . . ."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Ms. . . ."

"Lily."

"Lily—we understand. Mr. Grady was a good friend of ours, too. That's why I'm here. I'd like to learn a little more about how he . . . er . . . passed on. As his doctor, I have a special interest . . ."

"He spoke of you often, Doctor. He told me once, 'The only reason I'm still around is because of Dr. Fenimore.'"

Fenimore flushed. "Yes, well, hmm."

"What would you like to know, Doctor?"

"First, what time did you find him?"

"Eight o'clock. That's when I always come in."

"Where did you find him?"

"At his desk." She pointed at the scuffed and scarred roll-top desk on the other side of the room. The roll-top was up and the desk was empty except for a red blotter and two black 1950s-vintage dial telephones.

"Why two phones, Lily?"

"Oh, that." She shrugged. "The second phone is hooked up to one of the coffins in a mausoleum. One of our more eccentric customers was convinced she'd be back and promised to call and let us know what the hereafter was like." Lily paused. "She's been gone over ten years and we're still waiting." This time she managed to smile.

Horatio had sidled back to the counter and was staring bug-eyed at the second telephone.

"It would be quite a shock if it rang, wouldn't it?" Fenimore said.

Lily raised her eyes to the ceiling. "I'd pass out on the spot."

"May I take a look at that phone?"

"Sure." Lily unhooked the little gate at the end of the counter

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and stepped back to let them through. She was taller than Fenimore had imagined when she had been sitting at her desk. In fact, she was a fine figure of a woman.

Fenimore lifted the receiver and heard a normal dial tone. "It works!"

"Oh, yes. She left specific instructions in her will for its maintenance and funds to pay for it into perpetuity."

Gingerly, Horatio took the receiver from Fenimore. He listened and carefully replaced it.

"Could you tell me the location of this eccentric lady's tomb?"

Lily went over to the map and pointed out the plot. Number 104B. "Her name was Winchester. Joe—Mr. Grady used to joke about when Mrs. Winchester would check in." Lily's face crumpled.

"Now, now." This time Fenimore did place his arm around her.

Lily pulled herself together. "If you're going over there, you'll need this." From a cubbyhole in the desk she drew a smaller version of the wall map. "But you won't be able to get in. The mausoleums are all locked."

"Who has the keys?"

"We—er—I do."

"May I borrow them?"

Lily hesitated. "Mr. Grady never let anyone but family . . ."

"I understand—and I wouldn't ask unless I had a very special reason."

She looked puzzled.

"I'm not sure Mr. Grady died of natural causes."

"What?" she gasped.

"Now, I may be barking up the wrong tree, but it's just possible somebody—some kid—got into that tomb last night and made a call as a prank. It was Mischief Night, you know."

Horatio was staring at the doctor the same way he had stared at the telephone.

"You mean some kids broke in there and called Joe?"

Fenimore nodded, taking note of her use of his first name.

"Godalmighty!" She opened one of the filing-cabinet drawers and pulled out a box that jangled. Inside were a jumble of keys all neatly labeled with the number of the cemetery plot they belonged to. She shuffled through them and drew out one with the label 104B. She handed it to Fenimore. "If you catch the little bastard, give him one for me," she said grimly.

Brrrring!

Although it was only the office phone, they all jumped.

While Lily answered it, Fenimore pocketed the key. "Yes. It starts at eight o'clock. . . . You're welcome." She hung up. To their unspoken question, she said, "There's a tour of the cemetery every Halloween. Joe . . . Oh, my God. I'll have to lead it!" As she began

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frantically pulling out the drawers of Joe's desk, looking for his tour notes, Fenimore and Horatio left quietly.

Fenimore drove slowly over the gravel drive that wound through the old cemetery. Guided by Horatio, whose eyes were riveted to the map, they had no trouble finding the mausoleum. It was about eight feet high, with four windows and a front door. Over the door, carved into the stone pediment in letters a foot high, was the name WINCHESTER. Fenimore parked. Horatio was the first to reach the door. "Don't touch anything!" Fenimore cried. Hands in pockets, Horatio examined the door with his eyes only. Familiar with crime scenes, the boy had not needed the warning. "Looks okay," he said.

Fenimore nodded and inserted the key. Before turning the knob, he pulled out a handkerchief and covered it. To Horatio's disappointment, the door opened silently. He had hoped for a creak, at least. Inside, three sarcophagi stood side by side on a raised platform—each labeled with a brass nameplate. CORNELIA H. WINCHESTER commanded center stage. Fenimore moved around the cramped space until he came to the head of the center coffin. Resting on the raised platform at its base was a black dial telephone, identical to the one on Joe Grady's desk. With one difference. This one was covered with dust and around the center of the receiver was a neat handprint.

When Fenimore returned the key, Lily asked, "Had the tomb been broken into?"

"No," he said. "Everything was in order."

"Well, that's a relief." She put the key back in the box and closed the file drawer.

"Did anyone other than you and Mr. Grady have access to these keys?"

She shook her head adamantly.

"Did you ever leave the office unlocked—when you went out for lunch, for example?"

Again, she shook her head. "Mr. Grady and I brought our lunches. We never knew when someone might drop by to pay their respects."

Fenimore visualized the cozy scene. Lily and Joe chatting together at their desks over brown-bag lunches day after day. He wondered if Mary Grady had ever visualized the same scene. "Thanks for helping us clear this up."

"So you think he did die naturally?"

"Looks like it. I was way off base." Fenimore said.

Horatio sent him a quick look.

"Thank heavens," she sighed. "I'd hate to think of that dear man

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sitting here all alone and being shocked to death."

On the way home, Horatio said, "Did you catch the handprint?"

Fenimore nodded.

Joe Grady's funeral was the following Friday. Fenimore was attending with his staff. Horatio had never been to a funeral. When his father had died—killed in a drive-by random shooting—the boy had been too young to attend. He asked Fenimore what he should wear.

"Black," Fenimore told him.

"That's all I've got."

"Then you're all set."

Still anxious, the boy said, "Do I have to say anything?"

"Just shake hands with the bereaved, look grave, and murmur, 'So sorry.'"

"So sorry. So sorry. So sorry," he rehearsed.

"That'll do," Fenimore said.

Horatio went over to a mirror in the waiting room to practice appropriate facial expressions.

"I said *grave,* not grim," Fenimore admonished him.

Mrs. Doyle emerged from the rear of the house. Fenimore's office occupied only the front two rooms of his townhouse. She had been using another mirror, in his dining room, to powder her nose and adjust her black felt hat. His nurse looked the perfect picture of mourning.

"Come on. We'll be late." Fenimore hurried them out.

It was the most unfunereal day. The Schuylkill glittered in the bright sun and the last of the autumn leaves shone scarlet and gold. Fenimore would have preferred to be taking a walk along the drive or sculling on the river. But he continued toward their somber destination.

Joe Grady had been a likable fellow, and the little Catholic church in Roxborough was bursting at the seams. After the service, his family—Mary Grady, his two sons and three daughters—greeted their guests in the foyer of the church. There wasn't a dry eye in the place. Fenimore gave Horatio a little shove and he performed his part adequately—if a little loudly. His "So sorry" echoed in the tile vestibule and several people turned their heads. He proceeded to repeat the refrain to each family member, but in a more subdued tone. When Fenimore reached Mary, he introduced himself.

"Of course, we've met," she said primly.

And so they had, once, twenty years ago. She had accompanied her husband to Fenimore's office on his first visit (to look him over, Fenimore had surmised) and had never appeared since. Occasion-

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ally, she would call the office to harangue Mrs. Doyle about a bill. And often, when Joe called, you could hear Mary in the background badgering him to ask about the cost of his last visit or a new medicine. Fenimore shook her hand, noting its size and shape carefully. To his dismay, it was broader than his own. A far cry from the dainty print in the dust on the telephone receiver in the Winchester tomb. He had been so sure Mary had instigated the prank somehow, out of jealousy or to hasten the collection of the ample insurance policy Joe had taken out in her name. Joe had confided to Fenimore once that he was worth much more dead than alive.

At the reception afterwards, Fenimore caught sight of Lily lurking on the periphery of the crowd. She looked unexpectedly attractive in black, despite the pinkness of her nose—from weeping. At one point, he saw Mary glance her way, and if looks could kill . . .

Fenimore found himself surreptitiously eyeing the hands of all the female guests. (He had decided that no man could have such a delicate hand.) But what could be their motive? It would probably turn out to be a Mischief Night stunt after all.

"Doctor . . ." Lily had ventured away from the wall to join him. "A nice crowd, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes—and well deserved. Joe was a grand fellow."

She made no comment but, laying a black-gloved hand on his arm, led him to the refreshment table. An unusually small hand for such a large woman.

"The Catholics know how to celebrate a life, don't they?" she said, surveying the table overflowing with food.

"What . . . ?" Fenimore's mind had wandered.

"I said . . ."

"Hey, Doc. Can I have a beer?" Horatio leered at the fully stocked bar on the other side of the room.

"Certainly not." Fenimore leaned toward Lily. "You were saying?" She wore a peculiarly heady brand of perfume.

"I was just saying . . ."

"You should try the pâté." Mrs. Doyle appeared at his elbow, balancing a beer in one hand and a cracker coated with chopped liver in the other.

When he turned back to Lily, she had disappeared.

As people began leaving, Fenimore sought out Mary. In the midst of their strained small talk, he suddenly asked, "How long did Lily work for your husband?"

Mary's face stiffened. "Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered if she would have to look for another job."

"I don't see why. I'm sure Joe's replacement will need a secretary. Excuse me, someone is leaving whom I must speak to." Mary moved off.

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Fenimore looked after her. A most uncharming woman, he decided. But apparently not a murderer. He scanned the room for Lily. She was nowhere in sight. Perhaps she had left early. Fenimore rounded up his companions and escorted them to his car.

On the ride home, as his passengers discussed the merits of the funeral feast they had just enjoyed, Fenimore was preoccupied. Whoever made that call had to have the key. Lily had the key. But the file drawer was not locked. Anyone who came into the office could have taken it. But Lily had said that she and Joe never left the office unattended. *Never* was a strong word. Didn't they ever go on an errand—or to the bathroom?

On his visit to the cemetery office he had picked up a little brochure from a pile on the counter. It narrated the history of Spruce Hill, followed by a plea for membership in the "Friends of Spruce Hill," and listed the benefits. The first was a free ticket to the Halloween Tour. The second, free admittance to General Meade's birthday party. This was celebrated annually at the base of the tomb which bore his statue on horseback. Lastly, free admittance to a Victorian picnic among the tombstones—exactly like those that had taken place when the cemetery had first opened over a hundred and fifty years ago.

The first thing Fenimore did when he returned home was call the Spruce Hill office. He was greeted by a recorded message giving the days and hours when the cemetery was open. He spent a restless night. His frequent twists and turns annoyed Sal, his cat. Around three A.M., she left her spot at the end of his bed in favor of the sofa in the waiting room below. The next morning, when he called the cemetery, he was greeted again by the recorded message. Had Lily decided to take a few days off to recover from her sorrow after all? Fenimore left the office with no explanation and drove to the cemetery. This day was much more funereal. The sky was overcast, the river choppy, and there was a nip in the air. Fenimore switched on the car heater.

As he drove through the iron gates, he didn't know what he had in mind. The office was locked, as he had expected. And when he peered through the smudged window panes, it looked deserted. Slowly, he drove between the tombs, until he came to the Winchester mausoleum. He parked and got out. The wind was stronger and colder on the hill. Fenimore pulled up his coat collar and started toward the stone building.

The door was open, swinging in the wind.

He darted forward and looked inside. The sarcophagi were in their places. He made his way to the back of Cornelia's coffin. The telephone receiver had been wiped clean.

"I cleaned it." Lily stood in the doorway, holding a small pistol.

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"He was my lover for twenty years. Refused to leave his wife. Some Catholic thing. The only thing I regret is not being there to see his face when the phone rang." She laughed. The sound bounced eerily in the cold, stone place. "Too bad you had to get involved. I knew you suspected something as soon as you came. I thought of making up some cock-and-bull story about that second phone. But everyone knew about it. Even the gravediggers joked about it."

"Where did you get the gun?"

She looked down, as if she had forgotten it was there. Raising her eyes, she said, "In this neighborhood you can pick them off the trees."

"I think you'd better give it to me," Fenimore said.

"I wish I had all those years back, slaving in that crummy office, staring at a bunch of tombstones." She sighed. "Waiting. Hoping. Always hoping he'd leave her and run away with me. HA!"

The silence was heavy after that harsh sound.

"But, oh no—there were always the kids, or the Church—with a capital C—or . . ."

"You've done nothing, Lily. At least, nothing that anyone can prove. No one is going to put you in prison for a kid's prank." His voice was steady.

"Prank?" The gun shook in her hand. "I killed him. And you know it. You know how frail his heart was."

"But my testimony won't be enough, Lily. I guarantee it. Frightening someone to death is impossible to prove. The perfect crime. You'll go free."

"Free!" Her lip curled, and her next words fell like dead weights in the quiet room. "Free for what? To think—every day—how I killed the only man I ever . . ." She turned the gun away from Fenimore, toward herself.

"No, Lily!"

The noise was so loud in the small, stone room, Fenimore covered his ears in pain.

One fine spring day, on impulse, Fenimore decided to take a ride through Spruce Hill Cemetery. The daffodils were especially abundant there. He took Horatio along. As they drove past the Winchester tomb, Horatio cried out, "Hey, did you hear a phone?!"

Fenimore burned rubber as he screeched to a halt. Within seconds it dawned on him that if Cornelia Winchester had been placing a call, the phone would not be ringing in her tomb, but in the cemetery office. He glared at Horatio.

"April Fool!" said the boy.

"It's April fifth."

"Oh . . .?" He seemed amazed.

Grimly, Fenimore restarted the car. ●

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Too Many Poets

by Dennis Upper

With clues all gathered, it was time
For Nero Wolfe to solve the crime.
The likely suspects were arrayed
In front of Wolfe (they looked afraid).
Wolfe had the answer, without doubt—
Eyes closed, his lips moved in and out.
"I think," he said, "I've found the key
Which will unlock this mystery.

"Messrs. Smith, McKay, and Drew,
We all know that one of you
Submitted verse that was such schlock
It killed the editor with shock.
I've studied all the evidence
And one of you has no defense:
Poor poetry's the smoking gun
That will unmask the guilty one.

"Mr. Drew, it's on your head:
You made the editor drop dead.
I charge you with the heinous crime
Of writing poems in Hallmark rhyme!
Cuffs, Mr. Cramer, if you will!
Archie, Saul, you know the drill,
Escort this villain out of here.
Then please ask Fritz to bring my beer."

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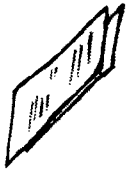

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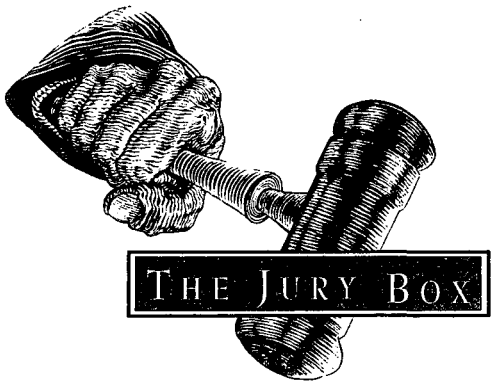

by Jon L. Breen

If you had to limit your current mystery reading to one nationality and one type of central character (e.g. private eye, amateur sleuth, lawyer, police officer, crook, spy), what combination would you choose? After painful deliberation, my choice would be British cops. There's P.D. James's Adam Dalgliesh, Ruth Rendell's Reg Wexford, Reginald Hill's Dalziel and Pascoe, John Harvey's Charlie Resnick (recently retired), Colin Dexter's Morse (recently deceased), Ian Rankin's John Rebus, Peter Robinson's Alan Banks, Anne Perry's Thomas Pitt, Peter Lovesey's Peter Diamond, Catherine Aird's C.D. Sloan, and the list goes on. A British writer best known for novels about an Indian cop has also been writing about one-shot British police while posing the question, When is a series not a series?

**** H.R.F. Keating: *The Hard Detective,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $21.95. Keating has previously departed from Inspector Ghote to bring us novels about rich, good, bad, and soft detectives. His "hard detective" is Detective Chief Inspector Harriet Martens, who seeks a serial killer of her fellow Birchester police officers following the list from Exodus beginning, "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth." This model police procedural is also an incisive character study from one of crime fiction's finest and most versatile practitioners.

**** Louise Doughty: *An English Murder*, Carroll & Graf, $23. British police come off less well in this cunningly conceived novel, widely reviewed as subverting the traditional English-village mystery. Mr. and Mrs. Cowper are found horribly murdered in their home. Their gifted but troubled daughter Gemma is missing. A young reporter for the *Rutland Record* sees a chance to advance her career while confronting reminders of her own childhood. Her spinster neighbor is writing a detective novel with a dis-

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gustingly ingenious murder method. The deeply probed and believable characters, shifting points of view, flawless style, and sense of pace will keep most readers riveted.

**** Edward D. Hoch: *The Velvet Touch*, Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505; $16 paperback, $40 signed limited hardcover. These fourteen tales of series thief Nick Velvet, all from *EQMM*, include the eight in which Nick encounters the competing crook known as the White Queen. Hoch's short story plots have more twists and turns, clues and misdirections, arcane facts and ingenious touches than most writers' novels. I especially liked "The Theft of the Overdue Library Book" and "The Theft of Leopold's Badge," the latter a rare pairing of two Hoch series characters. Velvet only steals the valueless, and his judgments of what is and is not valueless are a source of humor as well as philosophical debate. (For example, one person is valuable, but a group of people? Maybe not.)

*** Eric Wright: *The Kidnapping of Rosie Dawn*, Perseverance Press/John Daniel, P.O. Box 21922, Santa Barbara, CA 93121; $12.95. Wright agreeably combines the private eye and academic mystery in the first novel about Joe Barley, who in the spare time afforded by his part-time university English teaching job looks into the disappearance of a wealthy businessman's mistress. The solution of Barley's domestic problem will remind you of a sitcom—but a very good one. Old pro Wright is obviously having fun here, and so will the simpatico reader, especially anyone who has recently taught at the college level, especially as a part-timer.

*** Loren D. Estleman: *A Smile on the Face of the Tiger*, Mysterious, $24.95. For a sexy publisher friend, Detroit's Amos Walker tries to locate a writer of '50s paperback originals and winds up investigating present and past murders. The irony that Walker is an anachronistic shamus in the mode of those his quarry wrote about is not lost on the author or his characters. (Though he gets hit over the head, Walker has moved with the times to the extent of providing more information about the effects of repeated concussions.) As usual, the best feature is the Chandleresque style. Does anyone write as many witty and quotable lines of narrative and dialogue as Estleman? (It helps to have a friend or loved one handy to listen to the best bits.)

*** Lia Matera: *Counsel for the Defense and Other Stories*, Five Star, $20.95. A writer with a special knack for setting a scene and establishing a mood offers nine stories, all non-series except for "Dream Lawyer," in which both Willa Jansson and Laura DiPalma figure. Those originally projected as novels are wisely presented in shorter form. Especially recommended:

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"Do Not Resuscitate," a chilling tale of revenge; the satirical "Performance Crime," a welcome respite from all the downbeat tales in the collection; and "Dead Drunk," about a serial killer with a possibly unique murder method.

** Christopher Farran: *Houdini and the Séance Murders*, Salvo Press, distributed by Seven Hills, 1531 Tremont St., Cincinnati, OH 45214; $12.95. An admiring nephew serves as Watson to the famous escape artist in his investigation of murder during a séance in Trieste. Conan Doyle, bracketed in detection with Houdini by several earlier authors, serves a secondary and semi-comic role. Though he drifts from the main problem too much, Farran does a fairly entertaining job that is generally true to its 1920s period. Indeed, it sometimes resembles a silent movie of the kind Houdini once starred in.

** Andrew M. Greeley: *The Bishop and the Missing L Train*, Forge, $24.95. If you enjoy Father Greeley's Irish-American characters, including sleuthing priest Bishop Blackie Ryan, and his lovingly detailed portrait of Chicago, you may like this book. But don't expect a good detective story. The impossible crime problem implied by the disappearance of a widely disliked auxiliary bishop and the L train he was riding does not materialize.

* Amanda Cross: *Honest Doubt*, Ballantine, $22. Narrator Estelle "Woody" Woodhaven, a motorcycle-riding private eye, be-comes Archie Goodwin to Kate Fansler's Nero Wolfe—only this time it's Archie who is carrying the extra weight. The investigation of who poisoned the university English Department chair provides enough learned talk, much of it about Alfred Lord Tennyson, to divert the academic mystery fan, until the solution (disappointing, preposterous, and total guesswork, besides giving away the solution of a famous detective novel) lets the reader down with a thud.

A great bargain for short-story fans is Lawrence Block's *The Collected Mystery Stories*, Orion, dist. by Trafalgar Square, North Pomfret, VT 05053; $29.95 hardcover, $19.95 trade paper. The 71-story, 754-page volume doesn't contain quite all of the author's shorter work but does have the full contents of his collections *Sometimes They Bite* (1983), *Like a Lamb to Slaughter* (1984), *Some Days You Get the Bear* (1993), and *Ehrengraf for the Defense* (1994), plus a number of uncollected tales and three selections from *Hit Man* (1998), which he considers an episodic novel rather than a collection. The contents of *One Night Stands* (Crippen & Landru, 1999, out of print), published in a 450-copy limited edition consisting of (in the author's opinion) lesser early work, have not been included.

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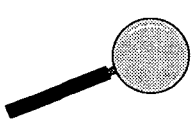

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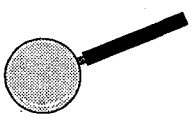

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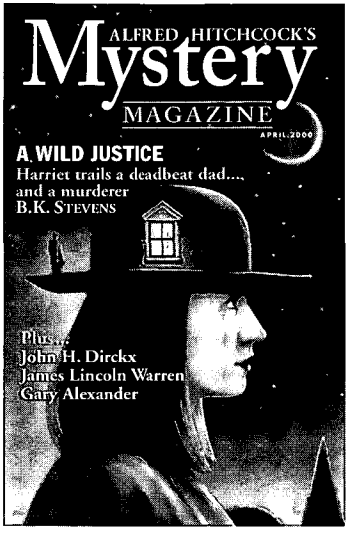

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